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OPERATION DRUMFIRE

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OPERATION DRUMFIRE

Somewhere in the back alleys of San Francisco a bunch of freaked-out fanatics had been triggered into a plot so fantastic as to stun the imagination.

What's more, the deal was being bankrolled by somebody right in the government's very own secret defense organization.

There was one way to pry loose the key to the lethal conspiracy. Drake didn't like it, but it was the way to save innocent lives—like Hazel's. Who could get next to the man with the answers?

HAZEL.

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Dan J. Marlowe

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder Fawcett Ltd., London

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First published 1972 by Fawcett Publications Inc.,
New York
Coronet edition 1972
Second impression 1973
Third impression 1973

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Printed and bound in Great Britain for
Coronet Books,
Hodder Fawcett Ltd,
St. Paul's House, Warwick Lane,
London, EC4P 4AH
by Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd,
Aylesbury, Bucks

ISBN 0 340 16467 0

OPERATION DRUMFIRE

CHAPTER 1

Billowing thunderheads loomed up over the mountain ridge directly ahead of the twin propellers of our Cessna 310N. I could see Hazel glancing continually from the map to the ground below and then to the clouds again.

We had been flying at 11,000 feet to provide a thousand feet of clearance above the highest crests on our 225-mile flight from Salt Lake City to Ely, Nevada. Just moments before, Hazel had pushed the throttles forward, adding another 2000 feet to our altitude. When she saw me watching her, she pointed on the map to the 12,050-foot elevation of Mount Moriah.

"There's a problem?" I asked when her eyes left the map to study the terrain again.

She ran a hand through her thick red hair in one of the few concessions to nerves I'd ever seen her make. "I'm afraid I'm a little off course, Earl." Her voice didn't have its usual ring of confidence.

I pointed to the radio compass dial on the instrument panel. The upright needle on its face showed that we were headed right toward the homing signal sent out by the Ely VOR transmitter. "It looks all right to me," I said.

Hazel shook her head. "I haven't really learned to trust my navigation unless I can actually see where I am, especially when clouds move in and hide the peaks. Mountain peaks still make the best landmarks in this part of the country."

"You mean we're lost?"

Her attempt at a smile was troubled. "Not exactly. I'm just a little confused." She glanced upward through the windshield at the cloud deck above. "The weather worries me. I can still fly well enough if we're lost, but bad weather flying—that's something else again."

She studied the map on her knee. "Jerry said we'd make it to the Ely airport before these clouds moved in, but they must have pushed down faster than he expected." Jerry Williams was the airport manager at the small private field, north of Salt Lake City, that we'd left an hour ago. "If those clouds ahead of us have packed down into the valley," Hazel continued, "we're not going to be able to land at Ely."

"We're getting close?"

"We'd better be," she said grimly. "I run out of calculated flying time in eighteen minutes. And if we miss the valley, I'm not exactly charged up at the idea of ducking around cloud-hidden peaks looking for it."

"You've got a lot more than eighteen minutes' gas, though."

"Oh, there's plenty of fuel. This magic carpet carries nearly five hours' worth, which gives it better than a thousand miles range. But gas isn't much good if I can't use it to get where we want to go." She banked the plane to the left, turning away from the high wall of cloud.

I wasn't feeling particularly comfortable. I have a lot of faith in Hazel, in many ways, but airplanes in general have never had my full confidence, and this was only the fourth time I'd been up with her. It was also the first time we'd made a trip of any distance. The flight to Salt Lake City yesterday had been smooth, sunny, and free of incident all the way. There were no weather or navigational problems. Great Salt Lake is a landmark no one can miss with the usual fifty-mile visibility in Utah. Any lake ninety miles long and thirty miles wide is difficult to overlook.

Today the situation was vastly different. Even the terrain below looked different. Most of the change was caused by the upper layer of cloud that grew thicker as we

flew southwest. When the clouds finally blanked out the sun, turning the world around us suddenly gray and dismal, I felt a clammy chill despite the even-temperatured cabin of the six-seater Cessna.

I was looking at Hazel's map again when the seat cushion under me dropped away abruptly. The snug seat belt across my lap was all that kept my head from ramming the roof. A wingtip dropped, and I could see Hazel struggling with the controls. "Turbulence!" she shouted as her hands went white-knuckled around the wheel.

We bounced through rough air like a stone skipping over the surface of a pond. The bumps weren't smooth or rolling; they were hard, jarring sensations that pounded the spine. The plane's stubby wings fluttered stiffly, and I found myself wondering how much safety margin engineers sitting at stable desks had designed into the thin-profile wings.

Hazel was intent upon easing the unexpected bumps as they occurred. Her teeth clamped down on her lower lip in concentration. The bouncing and the shaking diminished somewhat as we ran into smoother air. "From the way it looks ahead," Hazel worried aloud, easing her tight grip on the wheel slightly, "Steptoe Valley is going to have a cloud cap over it and we won't be able to see the field. The weather's supposed to be clear to the south. If I knew exactly where I was, I'd make a stab for Vegas."

"You're the skipper," I returned, but I was wishing for a quick descent rather than a prolonged flight.

Wisps of cloud began to flow past the windshield as the lowering clouds dipped to our altitude. "Damn!" Hazel muttered, banking to the left again to reach a clearer area. "Keep looking off to the right, Earl, and let me know if you spot a hole in the clouds large enough to give us a recognizable landmark."

I pressed my head against the copilot's side window. The glass was freezing cold. "There's a couple of thin spots, but no big breaks—wait, there's the ground! And a highway! And there's the railroad!"

"That's a relief," Hazel said briskly. "At least we're close to home. Now to get down on the ground in one piece."

"Why don't you duck down through one of those thin spots?" I asked. "It looks clear below."

Hazel reached over and patted my knee. "You're a trusting soul, horseman." Horseman is her pet name for me. We both go back a way in thoroughbred horse racing. "I've got less than a hundred hours logged, of which fifty went toward getting a license to fly this Green Goose, but you sound like you think I'm already a hot-shot instrument pilot. I have trouble enough keeping this kite right side up when I can see a hundred miles in every direction. The only instruments I can read with confidence are the altimeter and the air speed indicator."

I wasn't sure if she were joking or serious, and it didn't seem the time to ask. Hazel looked down in front of her at the instruments clustered on her side of the flight panel, and she frowned. Then she motioned for me to steady the control wheel which I did. She reached forward and tapped one of the gauges located in the upper left-hand corner.

"Now what?" I said.

"I don't know." Her voice was pitched slightly higher. "We seem to be losing air speed. It was reading 185 just a while ago. Now it's 160 and falling off." She checked the positions of the throttles, propellers, and mixture controls. "We're still flying level, we're not climbing, and we don't seem to have lost power. If something's gone haywire with the air speed indicator, we've got trouble."

The radio compass needle drew Hazel's attention as it began to edge away from its zero position at the top of the dial. I knew we were coming up fast on the Ely radio navigation aid because the aural signal over the cabin loudspeaker was continually growing louder. Hazel picked up the hand microphone. "Ely, this is Cessna N 3776 over Ely VOR at 46 flying at thirteen thousand on Visual Flight Rules clearance. Request local weather conditions. Over."

The radio voice from the ground was loud and clear. "Read you, 3776. Ceiling is four thousand feet, visibility twenty-five miles. Wind from the north at 11 knots, temperature seventy-two degrees. Landing on Runway 34. Intermittent rain showers east of the field."

The clipped, official tones of Wallie Beeman's voice were unmistakable. Wallie was the senior man of a two-man FAA staff that handled all aspects of Ely airport communications. I saw the corners of Hazel's mouth quirk upward at the sound of the familiar voice, but her smile faded at once. Her eyes swept the horizon outside the cockpit. We were completely enveloped in cloud.

A moment later we reached a clear spot, but the gray walls of moisture closed in immediately again. The turbulence increased once more. We couldn't let down until we were sure we had crossed the mountains surrounding the valley. Hazel dropped regular radio procedure. "Wallie, I'm sandwiched in between two cloud layers and it's beginning to get thick up here. Are there any open spots where I can let down?"

"Cessna 3776, stand by," Wallie's deep baritone responded.

"Don't tell me to stand by, you billygoat!" Hazel's voice crackled with asperity. "I'm in trouble right now! You don't throw out an anchor and float on the tide up here. I'm flying blind, and I know as much about instrument flying as you do about surgery. Which way do I go to get out of these clouds?"

"Turn south, 3776, and maintain present altitude. I'll be back to you in a moment." Wallie's strong voice sounded unperturbed.

I kept looking outside, hoping to see something besides gray vapor, but the ghostly wall was more dense than a steam bath. I could see Hazel had her hands full, so I kept quiet. She didn't need any distractions. "Cessna 3776, this is Ely," the radio blared. "Do you read?"

Hazel, still fighting turbulence, took her right hand off the wheel only long enough to jerk her thumb-extended fist toward me as a signal to answer. I picked up the mi-

crophone. "We hear you, Wallie," I said. "Hazel's too busy to answer. Go ahead."

Beeman's voice filled the cabin. "Max Fischer, who has his spread south of Connors Pass, says the edge of the cloud cover ends a little south of him. So keep on a heading of 180 degrees. You should be in the clear in ten minutes. You can let down visually then and come back below the cloud deck. The ceiling will hold at four thousand for the next couple of hours. Got all that?"

Hazel nodded vigorously. I thought she'd be smiling, but her mouth remained tense-looking. "Hazel thanks you, Wallie," I acknowledged. "She'll be back on the radio with the next call."

Hazel took the microphone out of my hand. Once more the turbulence had decreased. "This is the next call, Wallie. I'm holding steady at 12,500 and I haven't touched the throttles, but I'm losing airspeed. The damn indicator must have failed. How the hell am I going to land this scow without crashing it if I don't know how fast I'm going?"

"What's your outside air temperature, Hazel?" Wallie's voice had lost its official tone. It was quiet and reassuring.

Hazel looked around the instrument panel. I found it first and pointed to the temperature dial. "Twenty degrees Fahrenheit," Hazel responded.

"Then your airspeed indicator hasn't failed," Wallie replied. "Ice is clogging your pitot tube which operates the instrument. Turn on the pitot tube heat switch. It's mounted on a panel above the instruments, the first large switch right of center."

Hazel and I bumped hands reaching for the switch. "Got it, Wallie," Hazel radioed. "What now?"

"Relax. It'll be clear in a moment. Flying through cloud at below freezing temperatures will always ice up the pitot tube. It can even happen in clear air if it's humid enough."

"Get out the paddle," Hazel said. She sounded chagrined. "I'll assume the angle when we get down."

"It happens to a lot of new pilots," Wallie answered.

"No need to feel embarrassed. Call me when you're twelve miles out on your approach."

"Wilco, Ely," Hazel replied, reverting once more to regular communications jargon.

I watched the airspeed indicator. The needle which had been moving sluggishly at the 110 mph mark surged and settled down at 195. Almost in the same instant we burst out into bright sunshine. The plane was in a slight dive and tilted at least fifteen degrees from Hazel's disorientation while flying blind. She made a quick correction, and the Cessna leveled and righted itself. Far below us I could make out the cluster of buildings that was Max Fischer's ranch.

Ten minutes later Hazel deftly eased our overdue plane to the ground on Runway 34 so smoothly I didn't know we'd touched down until the rumble of the landing gear told me we were rolling on concrete. "Never a doubt, baby," I grinned at her as Hazel taxied us expertly toward the hangar. The rain showers in the vicinity of the field had done little more than settle the dust.

"I'm glad you think so," she retorted. "I'm almost afraid to stand up for fear I'll show I need a change of underwear." She swung the Cessna about and cut the engines.

I dropped a hand on her warm thigh, solid-feeling through her Levi's. "Not you," I told her in the sudden silence after the cessation of engine-sound. "Not Ironpants Hazel Andrews."

She snorted, then smiled a bit wanly. She unbuckled her belt and threw the lever over on the fuselage door. I followed her out of the plane. When I stepped down to the ground, Hazel was waving to a figure standing on the steps of the field's operations office. "Good show!" she yelled.

"Don't sweat it!" Wallie Beeman called back with his hands cupped around his lips. "Part of the learning process!" He went back inside.

We walked to our jeep, which was parked at the east end of the hangar. Two mechanics waved at us with big

grins. Hazel waved back less enthusiastically. "You drive," she said to me as we approached the jeep. "I'd like to sit back for a moment and compose my soul. To say nothing of my bowels." She shook her red head. "I'll tell you one thing, ol' buddy, I'm gonna have a little bit more respect for that Cessna critter the next time I crawl up in the saddle."

"You heard Wallie say it was good experience," I tried to soothe her as I got under the wheel of the jeep. "You won't be surprised that way again. Want to stop in town for anything?"

"There's dry cleaning. And I should stop at the bank."

The redhead's natural ebullience was definitely subdued. In the years I'd known her since we met in Florida —I was on the run from the law, and she was running a tough bar, although as I found out later, she was a very wealthy widow—she had seldom seemed more chastened. But if I knew my redhead, her bottomless vinegar would be rising to the surface soon enough.

I turned south at the exit from the airport access road. North would have headed us for Hazel's ranch and, beyond that, McGill's copper smelters. We hit Route 50 and rolled through East Ely on the way to Ely's business center.

"I'll get the dry cleaning while you go to the bank," I told Hazel when I parked in front of the casino. She nodded and walked to the corner. I crossed the street and picked up the dry cleaning, then detoured to Greg's Place for a quick snort of firewater. Our recent experience had also left my soul in need of a bit of composing.

I exchanged pleasantries with Greg, a stocky, forward-looking man who had been in the liquor business in Ely before Repeal. The first shot of wild moose milk was so settling to the nerves that I had another. When I returned to the jeep, there was no sign of Hazel. The sun was hot on the unshaded street in front of the gambling palace. I debated moving two blocks east to the city park through which a creek rushed full-bore in the shade of seventy-foot

cottonwood trees. The cottonwoods and wide-spreading Chinese elms were a tribute to the valley's high water table. Five miles outside of town nothing grew more than waist high.

Hazel appeared at the corner before I could start up the jeep. She was shuffling a handful of mail. The post office was on a side street block beyond the bank. "Look!" she said, sliding into the jeep. She pointed to a postcard. "It's from Chen Yi."

"From Nassau?" I asked, turning on the ignition.

"San Francisco," Hazel replied. "She's visiting relatives." She scanned the card as I backed away from the curb. "No address."

"Candy's probably in Reno or Las Vegas," I said.

Candy Kane was a powerful black man with a penchant for bizarre clothing. He was also a professional gambler who was a native Bahamian but had spent a lot of time in the U.S. Chen Yi was Candy's beautiful, six-foot-four-inch Chinese girl friend, one of the few women in the world to whom my own six-foot Hazel had to look up.

Hazel and I had recently shared a rugged experience in Nassau during which I had first placed Candy in a lot of trouble and then Chen Yi had supplied a great deal of assistance in getting us all out of it. Despite a flood of bullets ricocheting in their direction, Hazel and Chen Yi had hit it off exceptionally well together.

"Not much else in the mail," Hazel reported as I drove through town. She flipped through envelopes. "A bill for hangar space at the airport. And a few dividend checks."

"Nothing but dirty old money," I said, and she smiled. Twice widowed, Hazel had inherited substantially from Blue Shirt Charlie Andrews, a horseplayer who had a heart attack during his biggest winning streak, and from Lou Espada, her second husband, a mystery man the origins of whose money not even Hazel knew.

A warm wind rushed through the jeep's uncurtained interior, ruffling Hazel's flaming hair. Her strong-looking bare arms were silky-smooth in appearance, displayed

fully by her sleeveless buckskin vest. Cowboy boots studded with silver conches completed her ranch costume. "Feeling better?" I asked.

"Some," she admitted. "But I'll do a better job of avoiding bad weather the next time I see it on the horizon."

"You're learning," I said, turning onto the road leading to the ranch. We rode on its dirt surface for a mile until we crested a rise and came in sight of the ranch house, added-onto several times, the barns, and the outbuildings. Hazel's spread covers eighteen thousand acres, most of it given over to cattle-grazing.

I parked the jeep near the gas pump and we went into the house via the kitchen door. I thought I knew what was coming. When Hazel gets really shook up, she gets sexy. A time or two we'd been in situations together which resulted in sex when our minds should have been on almost anything else, including survival.

Sure enough, we didn't even make it through the kitchen before she turned around and put her arms around me. "Let's go upstairs," she whispered, rubbing her cheek against mine.

"What's upstairs?" I teased.

She didn't answer me. Actions speak louder than words with Hazel. She unzipped my slacks, and reached inside. Her face was buried in the hollow between my neck and shoulder, and I could feel the ripples of emotion coursing through her.

"Okay, let's go upstairs," I agreed. Hazel kissed me, then led the way to the rear stairway. Halfway up, she paused. She unbelted her Levi's and quickly pushed them and pale blue panties down over her wide-flaring hips. When she resumed the climb, the whole of her handsome, sleek-looking behind tick-tocked at me the rest of the way.

She knew what she was doing. Nothing turns me on more rapidly than proximity to her velvety buttocks. And it doesn't matter if the proximity is visual or tangible. I was ready by the time we reached her bedroom. Hazel sat down on the bed and I pulled her boots off. She kicked the

down-dropped clothing around her ankles to one side, then stood up and undressed me.

She got out of the rest of her things and we embraced in the center of the room. I moved her backward to the bed, and we collapsed upon it in a fleshy sprawl. My hands raced over abundant warm amplitudes. Despite my weight atop her, Hazel steered a course that landed us in the center of the bed. "Yes. Yes. Now. Yes," she murmured as I spread her firm ivory thighs and joined us. Her voice rose. "Ahhhhhhhh-h-h!"

I took my time. With Hazel burbling in my ear like a hissing teakettle, I rode the range at a steady gallop until I felt her quick-shuddering climax. I eased back to a canter until her internal quaking ended. When her strong hands fitted themselves solidly upon my shoulders, I spurred the steed again. We rode off together into a lazy, deliciously gratifying twilight-land which dissipated finally in a sensational double explosion.

It was quiet in the bedroom for a few moments, but Hazel stirred eventually after a long sigh. "D'you want to eat first or ride out and check the cattle pond?" she asked. We'd been having a problem with a mysterious drainage at the pond.

"What's your rush?" I wanted to know.

"Well, either way I can get dressed," she remarked, and started to slither from the bed.

I grabbed her bare hips and dragged her back. "You might have unfinished business right here, woman," I growled. She giggled and grabbed at my wig which came off. I wear wigs because of an automobile gas-tank explosion that deprived me of most of my original face.

Hazel turned serious when she saw I was serious. Her capable hands lifted and steered me again to a landing field surmounted by thick red curls. In thirty seconds we were threatening the track record, and we finished up in an all-out sprint that had the bed springs protesting. "That was a hell of a fine daily double, horseman," she murmured throatily after kissing me.

"A guy likes to try pitching those eighteen-inning ball

games once in a while," I told her. I rolled over on my back and stretched lengthily.

"Eat or the pond?" Hazel asked again after a bit.

"The pond," I decided.

We dressed after showering and went downstairs. Hazel stopped in the kitchen to remove steaks from the freezer to defrost while we rode to the pond. She took the wheel of the jeep and manoeuvered a rutted ranch road to the cattle pond a half mile away.

"It seems to be holding this time," she said, standing up in the seat to see better.

"Better, anyway," I agreed, looking at the shimmering water. "But we'd better check it again tonight before we sack in."

We rode back to the ranchhouse. A hundred yards from it, I nudged Hazel and she hit the brake. We could both see the rear end of a car parked at the far side of the house. "Expecting company?" I asked.

"You know I'm not, Earl. And I don't recognize the car."

I reached under the jeep's front seat and picked up my Smith & Wesson .38 police special. "Stay put," I said to Hazel. "And I mean put." She's the headstrong type sometimes.

I slid out of the jeep, carrying the gun, and started for the house, keeping it between me and the unseen driver of the car. I edged to the corner of the house where I could see the car's license. It was a rental plate. I liked the looks of the situation less and less. If the visitor was looking for me and not Hazel, the sky was the limit as to possibilities, almost none of them attractive.

I started to inch around the corner, gun extended. A big man, walking fast, turned the corner, and we collided, rebounding from each other. I had him centered in the .38's sight when I recognized him. I started to lower my hand, but the big man chopped at my wrist with a blindingly fast movement of his hand.

He caught more of my hand than he did my wrist, which was beneficial to my wristbone, but the .38 still

popped into the air. It struck a metal clothespole before it fell to the ground. By that time the big man had recognized me, too. "Damn!" he said. "Am I getting lucky, or is your trigger finger slowing down?"

"If I hadn't recognized you, you wouldn't be standing there asking me that, Karl," I said. I bent down and picked up the .38. It had a dent in the barrel where it had struck the metal clothespole, making it worthless. "Scratch one .38. I suppose the government will be happy to replace it?"

"Karl Erikson!" Hazel's voice said from behind me. "What do you mean by scaring us like that?"

"Law-abiding citizens like you two scared?" Erikson said quizzically. He's a huge, blond man with walking-beam shoulders, and his hair is a shaggy mat. "I thought you were keeping the Shoot-'Em-Up Kid in line these days?" he continued to Hazel. Erikson's nickname for me had developed from my facility with a handgun, a facility not notable for its connection with a law-abiding career.

"Come inside and have dinner with us," Hazel was saying. "You know we're glad to see you."

"Speak for yourself, baby," I told her. "Trouble follows this character around like a little black dog." I looked at Erikson. "Why are you sneaking around peoples' back doors?"

"I want to show you a movie."

"A movie!" Hazel exclaimed.

"You're a producer now?" I asked.

"A critic," he said drily.

"A movie!" Hazel marveled. "Why would you be interested in a movie, Karl?"

It was a good question. Karl Erikson was a government agent. I'd known him for two years, but I still didn't know which department employed him. Sometimes I felt that Karl's unspecified boss made him available to various concealed governmental units to pull their hotter chestnuts from the fire. All I really knew about him was that he was an ex-Navy commander, a communications expert, and perhaps the strongest man I'd ever known. We'd met in an

odd way, and he hadn't hesitated to make use of me despite the lack of a police department seal of approval. Karl Erikson was a complete pragmatist.

"I called this morning to let you know I was coming, but I couldn't raise anyone," Erikson was saying.

"We were flying back from Salt Lake City," Hazel explained. "In the Cessna Earl gave me. I'm going to put the steaks on, so you two come inside. I don't want to miss anything."

"I've got some gear in the car," Erikson said, and led the way to it. He reached into the back seat and removed a movie projector and screen. "Been behaving yourself?" he asked me when he straightened up again. His pale blue eyes studied me.

"Relaxing," I said with some emphasis. "And enjoying it."

"Fine. How's the flying going?"

"Fine," I echoed. I saw no point in going into the day's adventure. "See that hill over there?" I pointed. "I'm going to rent a 'dozer with a blade and level the hill, then put in a landing strip. Then the kitchen door here will be within five hours of anyplace a thousand miles away."

Erikson nodded. "You can't beat it for mobility." He took the projector and I took the screen and we went into the kitchen. Hazel was busy at the stove, and Erikson paused to kiss her on the cheek. It surprised me. The man most definitely did not wear his heart on his sleeve. The three of us had been in a couple of places where Hazel performed better than most men, though. Efficient performance was what earned Karl Erikson's admiration.

"Dinner in twenty minutes," Hazel said, smiling at Erikson.

"I'll show the film to Earl so he can be digesting it through dinner," Erikson said. "It only runs fourteen minutes."

"But I want to see it, too," Hazel argued.

"Are you really interested in seeing how they do it in Denmark?" I asked her.

"How do I know until I have a look?" she returned.

Erikson laughed. "We'll all see it again after dinner," he promised. "Where can I set up?"

"In there." Hazel gestured toward the seldom-used living room in the newer part of the house.

I helped Erikson carry his equipment into the living room. With the speed born of practice, he set up the projector and threaded his film while I set up the screen. "What's so important about this film that you want me to see it?" I asked.

"A matter of technique I thought would interest you," he replied. "Plus a background that should intrigue you and Hazel both." He went to the windows and pulled down the shades, then returned and switched on the projector. "The film is in black and white, and there's no sound."

Blurred printing appeared at the end of the beam of light that splashed on the screen, and Erikson refocused the projector lens. The printing became readable as I heard a footstep behind me and Hazel dropped a hand on my shoulder. She was standing there with a ladle in her hand. "Female curiosity," she whispered.

The lettering on the screen said ARNY, PRINT NO. 4. Then suddenly there was a picture of a starting gate on a racetrack. The image was sharp; I could see individual clods of dirt. The gate was at the end of a long chute, and from the viewing angle it was apparent the camera was quite a bit higher. The camera wandered away from the gate, along the chute, showing white panels of fence in clear detail.

The chute entered the main track, and across the backstretch a number of barns became visible. Hazel poked me with the ladle. "That's Aqueduct!" we said in unison. "In New York," Hazel added.

"And that's a film patrol camera taking those shots," I said. A film patrol camera shoots every inch of each race run so the racetrack stewards can view it afterward, assess the validity of foul claims, and determine who was trying to put whom into the infield.

The camera moved slowly along the backstretch to the

far turn, lingering momentarily at the five-eighth and three-eighth poles. "It looks as though the operator is warming up his camera before the day's races," Hazel murmured from behind me.

A helicopter appeared on the screen, and I felt disoriented. A second one appeared beside the first, rotor whirling busily. Then the camera returned to its panning of the racetrack surface, and I realized the camera operator had momentarily focused on two helicopters near the track.

The camera followed the sweeping far turn into the home-stretch, pausing at the quarter and eighth poles. A glimpse of the grandstand appeared, with only half a dozen people visible on the hardstand. The screen became blurred as the camera moved abruptly, stopping just short of the finish line.

One of the helicopters appeared again, much larger, obviously closer. The camera showed it descending until a corner of the tote board came into view, and with the eye of the camera peering over the board from its much greater height, the helicopter settled down on the grass behind the board. The rush of wind from its rotor blew shreds of grass in all directions. The second helicopter appeared on the screen and settled down fifty yards from the first.

"What has all this—" I began.

"Watch!" Erikson interrupted me.

Nothing moved on the screen for a moment except the circling rotor blades. Then a door in the first helicopter opened, and a man stepped out. A second man started to follow, then paused as the first man threw up his hands, took a single stumbling step, and slumped to the grass.

The second man snatched something from his belt and pointed his extended arm in the direction of the camera, but at ground level. Two running figures appeared at the bottom of the screen, rushing toward the helicopter. The glint of long-snouted automatic pistols showed plainly in their hands. The leader fired several times. I could tell

from the jerking of his wrist. The man behind him skidded to a halt, then toppled sideways. Both men were black.

Two more men appeared at the bottom of the screen. They sprinted toward the second helicopter whose rotor, idling after it landed, had again picked up speed. No door had opened in the second helicopter. The man who had been firing at the black men from the open door of the first helicopter darted back inside.

The black leader charged the still open doorway, stood outside it with the muzzle of his weapon thrust inside, and hosed down the interior with a side-to-side sweep of his automatic. The camera hadn't picked it up clearly, but through the helicopter's plastic bubble I thought I saw a figure inside crumple.

The second helicopter lurched upward from the ground. The two men who had attacked it continued to fire steadily, the snouts of their guns rising as the helicopter continued to ascend. Their faces were turned toward the camera for the first time, and they, too, were black. They stopped shooting finally and ran toward the first helicopter. One of them paused to empty his automatic into the wounded black man struggling on the grass. "The no-witnesses syndrome," I muttered.

The black leader was inside the first helicopter. He had encountered no further opposition. Through the bubble I could see him sit down in the pilot's seat after clubbing a body aside. The other two blacks joined him. Then the picture on the screen moved jerkily for an instant before going blank. The beam of pure light on the white screen made my eyes squint.

"The camera ran out of film," Erikson said softly.

"What the hell was all that?" I demanded.

"A partially successful hijack."

"The black flew that thing out of there?"

"He flew it out of there," Erikson agreed.

"But what—"

"My steaks!" Hazel wailed. She hurried from the room. "Don't you dare say a word I can't hear!" she called.

"It was race track money being delivered to the parimutuels manager," Erikson said to me.

"In a helicopter? They use Brinks! All of them, so far as I know."

"Not this time. Someone with a damn clever brain was interested in seeing that they didn't use Brinks. It was done—"

"Come and eat!" Hazel called.

"We'll talk afterward," Erikson said.

He switched off the projector, and we went into the kitchen.

CHAPTER II

We couldn't stop talking about it even while we worked our way through our meal. Hazel was the first to speak up. "You said the men shooting at the helicopters were after money," she said to Erikson. "How much did they get?"

"Only a small part of what they were after," Erikson answered. "The wrong helicopter got away. Wrong for the hijackers, since it contained the bills and the other carried the change. It was bad luck for them, because the operation was well planned."

"Well planned, maybe, but poorly executed," I said. "How did they con someone into shipping the cash in via helicopter?"

"Very simply. As we've reconstructed it, at nine o'clock on a Saturday morning the parimutuels manager at Aqueduct received a phone call from their bank saying the vault couldn't be opened and the bank would be unable to deliver the large amount of cash necessary to fund the track's parimutuel operation that afternoon. Saturday, of course, is their biggest day of the week, and the parimutuels manager nearly climbed the walls."

Erikson held out his cup to Hazel for a coffee refill. "The parimutuels manager ran to the track's general manager with the bad news," he continued. "The general manager grabbed the phone and tried everywhere to arrange an emergency loan, but the time element was critical and

worked against him since most financial institutions are closed on Saturday. It wasn't even as though he could accept a certified check; it had to be cash, and cash in carefully preplanned denominations, both paper money and change."

"That's right," Hazel said thoughtfully. "They'd need ones, fives, tens, twenties, and fifties in bills, and rolls of dimes and quarters. Plenty of rolls." She looked at me. "Right, horseman?"

"Plenty of cash, period," I said. "Aqueduct handles five million on an average Saturday. Of course the horseplayers get to walk away with some of it."

"Finally the general manager had an inspiration," Erikson resumed. "He telephoned his counterpart at Yonkers Raceway, where the trotters were running at night, and asked for a quick transfusion of cash from their parimutuel fund."

"Clever," I said. "And they flew it in via helicopter."

"Via armed helicopter," Erikson confirmed. "But not right away. There was a lot of red tape to be unwound, and in a hurry. The state director of parimutuel revenue had to authorize the transfer or Yonkers wouldn't have been able to do it. The director went to Yonkers personally with the authorization. Then the 'copters had to be chartered and guards hired, not an easy task on short notice, especially on a Saturday morning."

"But how could the hijackers have learned of this emergency transfer and set up their operation in such a short time?" I asked.

"They didn't," Erikson replied. "They were ready well in advance, because they caused the transfer. Aqueduct's bank had never made that original phone call about the vault that couldn't be opened, and half an hour after the semiaborted helicopter hijack, the regular Brinks truck showed up at Aqueduct as usual with the regular Saturday supply of parimutuels cash."

"Beautiful," I said admiringly. "In all the hullaballoo no one thought to call the bank verifying the vault situation. The hijacking types steered the cash right to them-

selves. They didn't care how it came, only that it be forced out of regular channels."

"We think they did even better than that," Erikson said. "In all the confusion at the track, it became rather general knowledge among at least semitop echelon employees that the transfer was to take place by helicopter. Assuming a highly placed collaborator, and since in the past it had been standard for VIPs arriving at the track via helicopter to be landed at the most suitable area behind the tote board, the hijackers knew almost exactly where to station themselves."

"But still they blew it," I said. "I'll say it again: it was professionally planned, all right, but the tactical operation looked like a game of kick the can in a schoolyard."

"I'm pleased to have a technician of your recognized attainments confirm my own conclusion," Erikson said, dead-pan. The blond man always carries a cynically sharpened harpoon for my previous beyond-the-law activities.

"I'd like to see the film again," Hazel said. "Weren't the men attacking the helicopters all black men?"

"They were," Erikson said. "And that fact has steered the investigation down some out-of-the-ordinary channels." He reached inside his jacket pocket and produced a photo which he handed to me. "Ever seen this man before?"

The picture was a blowup of a black man's face. The man was obviously dead, eyes staring. The picture was so sharp I could see individual blades of grass on the ground on which the man's head was resting. In the background was the blurred hulk of the Aqueduct tote board seen from the rear. I knew this was the immobilized and wounded black later killed coldbloodedly by his companion to make sure he did no talking.

It was a relief to be able to say no with conviction to Erikson's question. "No, I never saw him before," I said. My answer might easily have been the same even if I had known the dead black. Not that I was consciously practicing Be-Unkind-to-Karl-Erikson Week, but old habits are the hardest to break.

As in the present instance, every so often I have to re-examine my relationship with Erikson. The only reason I'm able to stay with Hazel at her place with any degree of mental ease is because Erikson holds a protective federal umbrella over me there. This was for favors I'd done for him in the past, favors which at times seemed likely to lose me more skin than that caused by the automobile gas tank explosion—induced by sheriff's deputies' rifles—which permanently altered my face. Not that all the favors were done willingly. Karl Erikson drives hard bargains.

He was regarding me quizzically. "We were able to make fingerprint identification," he said. "The man's name was Jeffrey Grant, and he was a former Black Panther in Oakland, California, who was ousted from the chapter there because of perpetual mad-dog tendencies toward all whites which caused him to refuse to accept chapter discipline."

Erikson took the picture back from me. "Jeffrey Grant was an extremist," he went on. "We're trying to find out more about him now. Friends, acquaintances, habits, background; the usual thing. So far we've only come up with scraps that haven't proved useful." He looked again at the picture in his hand. "There was one unusual item found in his clothing afterward."

He paused to light a cigarette. "This should interest you both. In his pockets were losing parimutuel tickets worth twenty-two hundred dollars from the Golden Gate Fields racetrack near San Francisco. The tickets represented just two bets, one for a thousand dollars and one for twelve hundred."

"Those are mighty big bets for Golden Gate Fields," Hazel commented. "The late Jeffrey Grant sounds like a high roller."

"Perhaps," Erikson agreed. "But the date on the tickets was interesting, too. Jeffrey Grant, or whoever purchased the tickets, had bought them just two days before Grant was wounded by a helicopter guard and then finished off ruthlessly by Grant's confederate."

"So Grant evidently didn't get too far away from Oak-

land after being tossed out by the Panthers," I said. "Exactly what does a black have to do to be expelled by that group?"

"He has to be an outright anarchist, I'd say," Erikson answered. "In fact, he'd have to be close—"

"Why don't we go into the library and get comfortable?" Hazel interrupted.

We rose from the table and Hazel led the way. Two years previously she had built a wing onto the original substantial ranchhouse which was almost a new house in itself. It featured thick-walled Spanish-style architecture with wood and stone interior walls, quarry tile floors, and Mediterranean furniture. The largely unused dining room —since we ate most meals in the kitchen as we had just now—contained glassed-in cabinets with expensive china and glistening crystal. Heavy, gleaming silver in the cabinet drawers testified to Hazel's excellent taste despite her cowgirl appearance.

The library was a handsome book-lined room with dark wood paneling and maroon-leather chairs. A large desk fronted the window on the north side of the room, overlooking the mountains purple-hazed in rapidly advancing twilight. I went to the liquor cabinet and took out three heavy crystal brandy ponies and placed them upon a silver tray. I filled the glasses from a matching decanter and carried the tray to Hazel's and Erikson's leather armchairs.

"I can't imagine how you'd become involved in an attempted racetrack hijacking, Karl," Hazel said as she accepted a glass from the tray. "And how did you get the film patrol strip?"

I didn't expect Erikson to answer. I'd worked with him often enough to know he's never very revealing about his activities and rarely responds to a direct question. So I was surprised when he replied.

"I was in San Francisco coordinating plans with local law enforcement people in connection with a meeting to take place shortly between our Vice-President and the Vice-President of Mexico," he began. "You've probably already seen something about the visit in the papers. Strin-

gent security precautions will be set up by the local authorities with monitoring and assistance from Washington."

"He means the Secret Service," I elaborated for Hazel's benefit.

Erikson glanced at me coolly as he sipped from his brandy glass. He has a way of looking at me with a slightly pained half smile when he thinks I'm talking too much. This seems to happen fairly often during our periods in joint orbit. "And the FBI," he said pointedly.

It was his not-so-subtle way of reminding me that he held a key to my past and my future. He didn't know everything about me, but he'd learned enough to put him in the driver's seat since we'd first met via an ex-bank robber who conned me into joining the pair on a wild caper into Cuba. Fidel Castro's Cuba.

It was only after the Havana experience was over that I learned that Karl Erikson wasn't a high-caliber thief but a top government agent carrying out a priority assignment. In consequence, I'd obtained very little cash from the successful job, having to make do with the dubious honor of working with a dedicated professional slightly inside the law. While working with Erikson lately, I'd protected myself a little better against penury since I didn't care too much for the skimpy government per diem basis upon which he always placed me.

"Since I was already on the scene, and dealing with the police forces most likely to be familiar with a dead hijacker with a known Oakland background, I was sent a copy of the racetrack's patrol film of the attempted hijack to check it out with these local people," Erikson continued to Hazel.

His seeming openness bothered me. It wasn't in character, and his voice had a smoothly rehearsed quality that bespoke innocence flown. Another factor that disturbed me now I had time to think about it was his arrival at the ranch almost precisely at the time Hazel and I returned from Salt Lake City. It indicated possible foreknowledge that left me unhappy. I don't like people knowing my movements when I haven't informed them.

I carried my brandy to Hazel's chair and stood behind its high back where I could look directly at Erikson while he kept his gaze locked upon Hazel's and continued speaking in easy, conversational tones. "I've shown this film to at least a dozen law enforcement groups in the San Francisco area, attempting to establish a connection."

"And you learned absolutely nothing," I said.

"A bit more than that," he answered me although his eyes were still upon Hazel. "The Oakland Police Department verified the dead black's identity. They also tagged him as Jeffrey Grant." Erikson's glance swiveled toward me. "Doesn't even the name ring a bell?"

"No. It's probably an alias, anyway." Names never mean much. I've used half a dozen myself. I've used Earl Drake since I acquired my new face because Earl Drake wasn't on a wanted list.

"We don't think so," Erikson corrected me. "Jeffrey Grant, identified by picture and fingerprints, was arrested once by campus police while the University of California at Berkeley was—ah—in the midst of a student riot."

Erikson stubbed out his cigarette. "Grant wasn't a student, mind you. He was a high school dropout, actually." His brandy glass was empty, and I moved around Hazel's chair, took it from him, and carried it to the liquor cabinet. Erikson's deep baritone followed me. "It was learned afterward that Grant had no connection with the student demonstration. The campus guards were backing up in front of advancing students, and they ran into Grant near the IDA building. The IDA is off limits to students and everyone else, so they busted him."

"IDA?" Hazel said.

"I keep forgetting you're not tuned in on Washingtonese," Erikson replied as I handed him his refilled glass. "IDA is as common a term in Congress-town as CIA or FBI is anywhere else. You've heard of the Rand Corporation, the 'think-tank' group of intellectuals in Santa Monica who look into problems and conduct studies for the Air Force?"

Hazel and I both nodded.

"Well, IDA does the same sort of job except that its boss is the Department of Defense. The initials IDA stand for Institute for Defense Analysis."

He took a sip from his glass. "Headquarters is a ten-story building near the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. Slightly less than a thousand people—very bright people, I might add—think up projects and farm out contracts for the solving of problems to a number of universities like Columbia, Princeton, Penn State, and Michigan in addition to the better known one on the Berkeley campus. These are the units that a number of peacenik students are unhappy about."

"And they probably cost the beleagured taxpayer the well-known pretty penny," Hazel commented.

"That's a redblooded Rocky Mountain conservative talkin' at you now," I told Erikson.

I was glad she'd made the remark. I wasn't sure I fully believed Erikson's story that he'd been comparatively close to Hazel's ranch because he'd been working with local security forces in the San Francisco area to safeguard the joint visit of the vice-presidents of the U.S. and Mexico. Karl Erikson was usually tapped for far more active assignments. If he returned to the subject of the attempted racetrack robbery after the tangent the conversation had just taken, it would be a strong indication he was actually working on something that had him thinking of involving me. And friendly persuasion had never been the name of this man's game.

"It depends upon how you measure results," he said in response to Hazel's comment. "Or upon who evaluates the results. In its last budget, the DOD propped up the IDA with fourteen and a half million dollars." Erikson gave Hazel one of the rare smiles that lightened his heavy features. "No one at the Pentagon seemed to feel the necessity to take a full-page newspaper ad announcing to the public what they got for the money."

"Fourteen and a half million!" Hazel whistled. She associated daily via her broker with substantial sums of cash, but the figure gave her pause. "That'd buy a few

bales of alfalfa, all right. What does come out of the small end of the horn?"

"Much of it is classified, of course," Erikson said easily. "One study I happen to know about was an investigation into the limits of ballistic missile accuracy. The IDA also produced much of the information that went into the crime study made by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice. The variances in those two projects alone should give you some idea of the scope of IDA's interests."

I wondered who the eggheads in IDA consulted about crime in their fact-gathering. I doubted that many of the real experts on the offensive side of the game had been contacted. My own expertise had dulled slightly, and Hazel had had considerable influence on turning my lifestyle toward less direct confrontations with law enforcement agencies.

"Were you working with IDA at Berkeley while you were in San Francisco?" Hazel asked.

"I consulted with them," Erikson admitted. "Since the recent upsurge in political kidnappings and assassinations, they've been researching an in-depth program aimed at determining more positive methods of protecting government officials and important public figures, including security measures taken against the hijacking of aircraft."

The look he directed at me at that point contained a hint of acid. Incident-prone as I seem to be, not too long before I'd been aboard a chartered plane loaded with seventy high-rolling gamblers. The plane had been hijacked with four members of the plane crew and two hijackers killed. A quarter million in cash had been wafted over the horizon. A Washington angle had involved Erikson, and, in a manner disquietingly revealing of the man's bloodhoundish tenacity, he had located me. To this day he seemed to feel that my responses to his questions on the subject of the two dead hijackers had been less than candid.

What bugged me about the present conversation was Erikson's seeming willingness to talk. Ordinarily he was

the most close-mouthed of men. I kept listening for an undercurrent that might disclose his purpose in being at the ranch, because I was sure he had one. And I didn't think we had heard it yet.

"Did you show the Aqueduct film to the IDA people?" Hazel inquired.

"Yes, because of the air-hijacking feature. They've been given a print to study. But my main purpose in talking to them was to get a possible lead on Jeffrey Grant, tenuously connected to IDA by the Oakland Police Department and the University of California campus police. Grant is my only tie-in to the Aqueduct incident."

So we were finally back at the Aqueduct incident even via so devious a route. I went to the liquor cabinet and refilled my own glass.

"Were they cooperative?" Hazel wanted to know.

"Not really."

Somehow I doubted that. Erikson's plugged-in situation in Washington left very few areas in government where he couldn't bring pressure to bear when he chose. He proved that to me one quiet Sunday afternoon when he turned the Atomic Energy Commission staff upside down to obtain detailed information on a stolen nuclear warhead I retrieved for him. I did it illegally, and in the pursuit of which endeavor I intercepted forty percent of the concussion effect from a hand grenade.

"I'd had some previous contacts with IDA in addition to the current planning for the security of the two vice-presidents," Erikson continued, "but in the case of Jeffrey Grant I ran into something of a dead end. The IDA personnel director informed me that Grant had never been an IDA employee. It seemed an outside chance, anyway, since it's a technical group that uses few file clerks, messengers, and custodial people which, with his lack of education, were the only kinds of jobs Grant could reasonably have qualified for within IDA."

"So you came away with nothing," Hazel sympathized.

"Not quite. In an automatic double-check, I moved down from the top echelon and tried the same questions at

grass-roots. I showed Grant's blown-up photo around"—he touched his jacket pocket—"and three people stated that Grant was a vaguely familiar figure inside the compound, although none of them knew what job he held."

"But you said the personnel director said he had no job in IDA!" Hazel exclaimed. "Surely he'd know! And how could anyone conclude a man was working in the same organization without actually seeing him on the job?"

"It's possible, given the nature of some of the IDA jobs, in an agency where so much of the work is classified." Erikson rubbed his chin. "Some of it's so secret that only a limited number of people are permitted to deal with it. These few are placed in an isolated part of the building with restricted access, so not everyone working for IDA comes in contact with everyone else. Multiply a single secret project of this nature by a dozen or so which might be underway at any given moment, and you have tight compartmentalization and cause for erroneous conclusions as to who is working for IDA and who isn't."

"Erroneous on the part of the personnel director?" I asked.

"An interesting point," Erikson smiled. "Sometime when I'm on a sabbatical, I must trace exactly how high the need-to-know syndrome persists with various—ah—sub-rosa organizations with which I come in contact."

"So now you're on your way back to Washington," I said. "Or is it New York?"

"You know how much I'd hate to return to either with as little information as I now have, Earl," he said mildly. "I have the dead body of a black man—an unclaimed body, by the way—about twenty-eight years old, five feet ten inches, approximately one hundred fifty pounds, no known relatives or friends, bearing the name Jeffrey Grant. I'd like to do a little better."

He was staring directly at me when he said it, and my foreboding increased.

Before I could reply Hazel glanced out the window at the gathering darkness outside. "Why don't you drive out and check the cattle pond again before it's full dark,

Earl?" she suggested. "Then we won't have to look at it again until morning. You can take Karl with you while I rinse the dishes."

I moved out from behind Hazel's chair. "Want to take a ride, tenderfoot?" I asked Erikson.

He hesitated, and I had the impression he would have preferred to stay and talk to Hazel but didn't want to appear that blatant about it. "All right," he said finally, and rose from his chair.

We left the library and the new wing of the house. I led the way through the kitchen to the back door and down the path leading to the barns. On the gravel Erikson caught up and swung along beside me as our shoes crunched in unison. Enough light remained in the purpling sky for me to see his expression. "What are you diddling around about?" I asked him. "You came out here to the ranch to sell something, so why don't you lay it on the line?"

His heavy features settled into familiarly noncommittal lines. "Sell?" he said blandly. "Since when have I been a salesman?"

"Since sometime before you hired a car and drove out here," I insisted. I motioned him in the passenger side of the jeep sitting in front of the main barn. I climbed in myself, started the engine, and listened to it turn over for a moment. The first chill was creeping down from the mountains and a few stars were already brilliant in the early-evening Nevada sky. "Why is this Aqueduct thing bugging you?" I asked above the sound of the motor. "You know it's not in your line."

"I told you," he replied with exaggerated patience dripping from every syllable. "I was asked to check out a possible West Coast connection because I was already on the scene."

I turned on the jeep headlights and watched the strong beams pierce the gravel road ahead of us as I headed out of the ranch yard. "Asked by whom? My guess is that it wasn't the New York City Police Department. Right?" Erikson didn't say anything. "So Washington was interest-

ed because of the ex-Black Panther connection, and you've run the trapline back to one of their pet undercover projects, the Institute for Defense Analysis, and you're welded into the situation. Is that it?"

The jeep bounced along the tree-lined rutted road for another three hundred yards with its lights casting erratic shadows behind the bordering cottonwoods. "Aren't your headlights unusually bright?" Erikson said to me then.

"Special sealed beams. I like to see where I'm driving in terrain where cows walk out onto the road."

"Automobile manufacturers don't make special sealed beams for public sale," Erikson said in a positive tone. "They'd be too blinding on the highway at night."

"If a man's got the price, who said they have to be made by auto manufacturers?" I challenged him. "And it only takes a screwdriver to change them if we get out on the highway at night."

"I forgot I was speaking to the spendthrift Shoot-'Em-Up Kid." Erikson sounded amused. "What Earl wants, Earl gets, is that it? I must remember you as a source of supply if I encounter a situation that calls for stronger-than-ordinary headlights."

"Aqueduct," I reminded him. "That's what we were talking about. Does Washington think since you've backtracked the dead black to the vicinity of the IDA setup that IDA brains rubbed off on the group setting up the Aqueduct caper?"

"They didn't rub off on Jeffrey Grant," Erikson said. "The lad had an IQ of 78 with his muscles outnumbering his brain cells. And study of the film proves beyond a doubt that Grant was taking orders, not giving them."

I tried a tangential approach. "The helicopter part of it is interesting because of your stated prime purpose for being on the West Coast, the protection of the two VPs. You've undoubtedly considered the fact that anyone planning fun and games with them would be smart to know what the IDA was advising in the way of protection?"

"I've considered it."

And that was all. Erikson said nothing more. The jeep

moved out of the cottonwoods and approached the banked cattle pond. I turned sideways on the road until the headlights were aimed across the pond, then stood up on the seat as Hazel had done that afternoon. "It's holding," I said when I saw the glistening ripples caused by the night breeze, the water brownish-looking from the initial erosion of the newly placed earthen dkes. "I was beginning to think we had a spot of quicksand in there."

I turned the jeep around and we started back toward the ranchhouse. "There is one thing you could do for me, Earl," Erikson said as the cottonwoods closed in over our heads again.

"Now why did I have the feeling there might be?"

But sarcasm was always wasted on Karl Erikson. "Do you have personal knowledge of a gang capable of planning and executing the Aqueduct attempted hijack?"

"No," I said. If I had, I wouldn't have told him. Old habits die hard. "Gangs, hijack or otherwise, are outside my jurisdiction. I always went it alone."

"But you do know someone who might have such knowledge?" he persisted.

I started to say no again, then stopped. I did know such a man, or rather had known him. The contact had withered recently. The advantage in attempting to revive it and ask Erikson's question for him would be to get rid of Erikson. The damn man made me uneasy just by being around. My qualms about breaking a lifelong custom could be dissolved in favor of seeing Erikson leave the ranch. Especially since any answer I received was almost sure to be negative. On film, the Aqueduct affair had looked more like a military skirmish than a criminal effort. "There's a phone call I could make," I said at last.

"I wish you'd make it."

That's outside the pattern, too, I thought.

When did Karl Erikson ever ask nicely for something he could command?

CHAPTER III

We reached the barn, reparked the jeep, and went into the kitchen. Hazel was sitting at the table with a magazine and a cup of coffee. She smiled at us as we entered. "It's holding," I reported. "Listen, baby doll, I'm going to make a phone call I don't want this guy to hear. Take him outside and away from the house. Don't let him near his car." Karl Erikson was an authentic genius in the field of manipulating extracurricular electronic monitoring devices. "Take him into the barn and see if he wants to make out with you, okay? Keep him busy."

Hazel's smile widened to a gamin grin. "Now that's an intriguing assignment," she said, lowering her already husky contralto to an even more seductive wave length. "Ready, Karl? Look at him, Earl! He's blushing!"

"Blessings upon thee, loving pair," I said. I made a pushing movement toward the door. "Out."

Erikson hesitated as though he were going to refuse. He looked embarrassed. I'd never seen him in action with a woman. Most of the places I'd been with him, of course, there'd been more cylindrical bits of lead than kisses flying. Once in Havana, though, a beautiful Cuban girl had gone for him like a ton of coal on a ten-pound scale, but if she hadn't provided us with a hideout, he wouldn't have known she was alive. A strange man, Karl Erikson. A dedicated man.

He finally left the kitchen with Hazel, and I went into the living room to use the telephone. Some phone numbers

you never write down because you never have to look them up. I hadn't used it in years, but I dialed the Washington, D.C., number. I identified myself to the answering service and asked to have Mr. Frenz call me back. All of Robert "The Schemer" Frenz's business was done on a call-back basis. "The Schemer" changed his contact number among different answering services like he changed shirts.

The phone rang in six minutes. "This is the hard metals man," I said when I picked it up. Robert Frenz preferred to keep his clients labeled by category.

"Well, well, well," the remembered voice said briskly. "A voice from the past. What are you doing in the wilds of Nevada?"

"Keeping a low profile, Schemer."

"Mmmmmmmmm?" There was an element of doubt in the voice. "Now why do I recall hearing that bank vaults in your vicinity were a good risk once more? That the leopard had done a bit of spot-fading and wasn't operating as before?"

"Nyet, Schemer. I scored on a UN diplomat's safe in the East Sixties in New York a while back. It was big enough to let me do some coasting."

"Ahhhh, I see." The voice became more cordial. "That East Sixties job did carry your cachet. Very professional. Very. Who tipped you?"

"I lucked into it."

"I'm relieved to hear that, you know. I'd hate to think I was losing a client by falling behind in the information-gathering department. Well, I suppose you want a package now or you wouldn't be calling? I ran through my file cards before phoning you back, having noted your area code, and there's a lovely little bank job in Oregon that would be foolproof, given your verve."

"You're ahead of me, Schemer. Right now I'm putting together a team and I need some muscle. I'm trying to contact a man named Jeffrey Grant, and I thought you might be able to help."

"Sorry, but Mr. Grant is no longer with us. He shuffled off on the Aqueduct Racetrack affair."

"Aqueduct?" I pretended to be puzzled. "Oh, you mean the helicopter thing. Yeah, I did see something about that in the papers, but not very much."

"With good reason," Frenz assured me. "The authorities would have been even more witless than usual if they'd broadcast in the land a scheme so readily adaptable elsewhere." With Frenz it was never an idea or a plan or a project; it was always a scheme. That was how he got his nickname. "It was professionally planned but terribly botched."

"Well, that's a dead end," I said.

"Literally, my boy. Literally."

"I suppose it was your project, Schemer?"

"I regret I can't claim the credit. The scheme was impeccably put together, but the operators came down with a bad case of foot-in-mouth. I was curious enough to make a few inquiries, but I've learned nothing about the brains behind it. I'm sure I will eventually, though. There aren't that many in my line of work."

He was right about that. Men who can put together a plan for a bank robbery detailed enough to include the seconds-on and seconds-off of all nearby traffic lights don't come like oranges on trees.

"Since you're recruiting," Frenz continued, "I could give you the names of a couple of Grant's friends."

"Which side of the country are they on?" I asked in pretended doubt.

"Your side. The San Francisco area."

"Okay, shoot. I'll see if I can locate them."

"Tom Carter and Roy Perry are the names. Sometimes. There have been aliases. Try the Commodore Bar in East Oakland."

"That address would make them black."

"And proud of it, I understand."

"Thanks, Schemer. I'll be on the horn to you again."

"Don't forget my little Oregon scheme. You'd do justice

to it. You're an operator, and you pay your bills. 'Bye, now."

I hung up the phone. In seven or eight years of doing business with him, I'd never set eyes on Robert Frenz, and neither had anyone else who used his specialized service. After a proper phone introduction, all business was transacted by phone. If agreement was reached on a price, usually a percentage of the take, detailed plans were sent registered mail to a prearranged alias at a general delivery address, and payment in cash was made to Frenz the same way afterward. The man left no loose threads. Anyone who tried to hold out on him had trouble afterward. Frenz had pipelines everywhere.

I went out to the barn and found Hazel and Erikson sitting in the jeep in semidarkness broken only by a feeble incandescent light anchored outside the barn at the third floor level. "He wouldn't even go inside with me," Hazel reported. "I'm losing my sex appeal."

"I don't think it's that," I disagreed. "After the way you dusted off the Mafia-type in Nassau with a roll of nickels in your dainty paw, the poor guy figured he was a certain loser." Hazel laughed, and I turned to Erikson. "Two names, supposed friends of the late unlamented, Tom Carter and Roy Perry. I was told to try the Commodore Bar in East Oakland. Only a black man will be able to make an on-the-spot check if you're planning to dig in there."

Erikson nodded.

"Karl thinks I might be able to find out something about those large bets at Golden Gate Fields by contacting my racetrack friends, Earl," Hazel said brightly.

I looked at Erikson's bulk in the jeep silhouetted against the darkness. "You mealy-mouthed sonofabitch, I knew you were weaseling around here for something. You're not going to suck Hazel in even on the fringe of a deal like this, understand?"

"You have one vote, compadre," Erikson said drily.

"It would be fun," Hazel chimed in. "We haven't been

to the track in ages, Earl. And being that close to San Francisco, we could visit Chen Yi."

"You realize that any project this man is associated with turns out as hairy as a woolly caterpillar?"

"It would be a very simple investigation-type thing," Erikson interposed. "There can't be many bettors laying it in like that at a comparatively small racetrack."

"I know you, man," I said positively. "If you got Hazel that far down the road, there'd be something else you wanted her to do. The answer is no."

"Let's sleep on it," Hazel suggested. "Karl, your bedroom is the one at the top of the stairs on the left."

Erikson stepped down from the jeep. "Thanks, Hazel, but I'm driving back."

"But you can't fly out of Ely tonight!" she protested.

"To Reno," he specified.

"But that's a five-hour drive!"

"Six, for anyone but Lead-Foot Hazel," I said. "Sleep over, man. Why run yourself off the road because I don't love you?"

Karl Erikson smiled one of his infrequent smiles. "I'll see you at Golden Gate Fields," he said. "Thanks for everything." He walked toward his rental car.

I followed him. "What makes you think you've made a convert?" I jabbed at him as he started the motor.

He raised his voice above the engine-sound. "You may know women's bodies, friend, but I know women's minds. See you." He drove off and left me standing there.

The downstairs was dark when I went into the house. Hazel was upstairs in the bedroom. "You weren't very nice to Karl," she started in on me.

"You mean I broke the code of the West?" I'd thought of something while climbing the stairs. Erikson must have given Hazel a phone number to contact him in San Francisco. I opened her handbag on the bureau.

She paused with down-drawn jeans at mid-thigh. "What do you think you're doing in my bag?" she blazed at me.

"Looking for your birth control pills. It's time you had

twins and settled down." I found the phone number in Erikson's bold, sprawling handwriting, and I put it in my wallet.

"You put that back, Earl Drake!"

"Bank it in the side pocket, baby," I told her as I started to undress. "Just forget the man ever mentioned it."

We slept farther apart than usual on the big bed.

In the morning, of course, she snuggled up to me like the satiny-skinned, silky-fleshed, luscious female animal that she was. "San Francisco would be such a nice vacation, Earl," she coaxed. She emphasized the statement by slithering herself up on top of me, belly-to-belly, whereupon she began rocking the boat. Two minutes later she reached down and efficiently employed my natural reaction. Nobody said anything intelligible for the best part of ten minutes.

I'd had time to do some thinking while waiting for sleep to take over the night before. Erikson was correct about Hazel's mind. If I pushed against San Francisco hard enough, I'd push her into going without me. I didn't want that, because without me to keep her on the rails she'd be a shining target for any proposal Erikson aimed at her idealism.

And when I considered it, I had a personal reason for going to San Francisco. Erikson had smashed my .38 during our little misunderstanding connected with his arrival at the ranch, and I needed a replacement. I'd been considering switching to a new, automatic weapon. This might be the time.

So I let Hazel work hard at changing my mind. We blew our respective boilers within thirty seconds of each other, fell asleep for another hour, had breakfast, packed, and headed in the jeep for the Ely airport and the Cessna 310N.

I loaded seven pieces of luggage into the baggage compartment, six of them Hazel's. Hazel was inside the terminal office with Wallie Beeman, making out a flight plan and clearance. She bounded out of the office with a confi-

dent smile on her face. "Our lucky day, Earl! Only light headwinds, not a cloud along the whole route, and perfect weather on the coast. Let's make like a bird."

I untied the mooring ropes and stored them in the wing locker. Hazel settled herself in the cockpit and began going over the preflight check list. I climbed aboard, buckled myself into the right hand seat, and began arranging in orderly fashion the navigation maps Hazel passed to me.

I watched her while she tested switches, checked gauges, and worked levers in a methodical manner. Then she cranked up the engines and taxied us to the north end of the field. After a go-ahead radioed to us by Wallie, Hazel eased out onto the runway, advanced the throttles, and tilted the sleek, pointed nose of the twin-engine craft after a fifteen hundred-foot run. The drab-looking brown earth dropped away below us and we headed west toward a canopy of never-ending blue sky.

We didn't strike out directly toward our destination because of a formidable mountain range with barren, snow-capped peaks and bleak-looking, inhospitable valleys. For the first 240 miles we weaved back and forth following Highway 50 which snaked through passes and around hills which varied from two to five thousand feet below us. Hazel held the Cessna at an unvarying fifteen thousand feet.

She was the first to sight the bright emerald surface of Lake Tahoe south of Reno where she tuned the radio compass to the Sacramento range. An hour later the needle spun 180 degrees. Sacramento was directly below. "Last leg," Hazel announced. "Sixty miles to go. I'll start letting down."

She retarded the twin throttles, and an ear-piercing horn sounded, startling me. Hazel patted my hand, then pointed to the engine instruments. "Watch the rpm gauge!" she said. She shoved the throttles forward halfway, the engines picked up speed, and the horn fell silent. "It's just a warning signal in case some preoccupied pilot pulls his throttles back to land but has forgotten to put

down his landing gear first," she informed me. I reminded myself to read the pilot's handbook on the Cessna so I wouldn't be subject to any more such surprises.

In a short time Hazel pointed over the cowling in front of us. "There's the field, so we can drop the gear and give them a call."

I could see the geometric runway pattern, but I couldn't see the Bay or the ocean, or any of the familiar bridges. The airfield was in the midst of an isolated residential district. "I'm lost," I confessed. "Where are we?"

"Fasten your seat belt and turn on the auxiliary fuel pumps. We're landing at Buchanan Airport near Concord. It's just on the other side of the San Pablo Ridge from Oakland, so it's no more than a twenty-minute run to the Bay Bridge."

"Isn't there a closer field on the other side?"

"Yes, but Wallie figured I'd be better off keeping away from the Bay area where the sky is cluttered with heavy commercial and military jet traffic. He also promised to call ahead on a tac line so a rental car would be waiting for us at the flight line."

Hazel greased the plane down onto Runway 190 as if she'd done all her practice landings there. She taxied expertly to the ramp where a white-coveralled mechanic waved us to a parking position. "I'll tie it down and service it for you, Mrs. Andrews," he said. "If you'll just stand by the tip of your starboard wing so the driver can see you, he'll bring the car and load your luggage immediately."

One of these days I'm going to get used to traveling first class.

Hazel glanced at her watch while we waited for the rental car to arrive. "We could make the last four or five races at Golden Gate Fields if we drove to the track right now," she suggested.

"I'll drink to that," I agreed.

She tucked her arm in mine. "This is going to be fun."

I aimed the rental car along the access road to Route 4 and drove west to Route 80 where I turned south. I found

I was looking forward to arriving at trackside more than I'd anticipated. It had been quite a while since Hazel and I had given the mutuel machines a whirl.

Route 80 took us into Albany, and I turned off at the Gilman Street exit where signs said Golden Gate Fields Racetrack. We negotiated the track entrance and the valet parking lot and entered the grandstand, neither of us caring particularly for the clubhouse area. We have a division of labor at a racetrack: I'm the handicapper, and Hazel's the money manager. I pick the horses, but she decides where to put the money.

She's good at it, having the nerveless contempt for cash necessary for the successful gambler. It's not hard for her to be nervelessly contemptuous of cash in her present financial condition, but I'd listened to enough racetrack stories to know she operated the same way when it was chicken today and feathers tomorrow.

Hazel's first bet of the day is likely to be a thousand dollars and her second only a hundred, with no consideration given to previous results. Each race is a whole new ballgame. I use the Racing Form, and I handicap for the third-best horse. Oftentimes third-best in the figures might be sixth or seventh best on the tote board. I don't get any more winners than anyone else, but I do get better prices.

Hazel often gets a tip on a race from one of her friends. Not a tip in the sense that a race is fixed: little things, like a trainer trying harder on a given day because the feed bill is due, or a horse being shipped in for a race because he showed a liking for the track. I give points for tips like these, but they never change our minds completely.

Golden Gate Fields Racetrack is right on San Francisco Bay, and I mean right on it. With the wind in the right direction, a tobacco chewer can just about lob his cud from the grandstand into the Bay. The track is so close to the water that the tides affect the running surface and the speed of the horses. At one time Golden Gate along with Turf Paradise near Phoenix and Centennial near Denver were the premier speed tracks in the country. You could hear a horse's hooves rattle farther than you could see the

horse. Golden Gate isn't quite as fast now, but a field of handicap sprinters can still get from here to there faster than just about anywhere else.

We were in time for the sixth race on a ten-race card. Hazel placed me at the end of the grandstand farthest from the finish line, and I went to work with the pencil while she went off to get a hot dog. Hazel's one personal concession to racetrack superstition is a hot dog immediately upon arrival.

"Nate Ramsey is here," she reported when she returned. I showed her my program with the No. 7 horse circled. "And Miltie Doxiadis waved to me." Both men were professional gamblers.

Hazel glanced at the tote board while I peeled a thousand from my wallet and handed it to her. She matched it with a thousand from her handbag. "I'll take a look at them in the paddock," she said, and went off while I started to figure the next race. As a ranch girl who grew up with horses, Hazel knows when a stifle bandage is for real and when it's for show.

"I took the No. 7 two hundred to win and two hundred to place," she said when she came back again. I never ask her how she arrives at the amounts she bets and she never asks me how I come up with the horses I give her. "I saw Gracie Everett, Big Joe's wife, in the paddock, and Eddie Johnson is a seller at one of the ten-dollar windows," she continued. "Eddie must have had a bad streak."

We sat and watched the race. No. 7 was 13-1 when they went off. He drove right to the front as though catapulted, and was still on top by five lengths going around the far turn. He was still leading by a length and a half going past us, but backing up fast. Our angle from the distant finish line was as poor as it could be, but I was sure he hadn't held on.

"Maybe we'll get a dead heat," Hazel said hopefully. At a racetrack she's the eternal optimist.

But when the photo finish light went off on the board, they put up No. 3 first and No. 7 second. Hazel watched the board light up showing $11.80 for place on No. 7, giv-

ing us $1180 for the $200 place bet of our $400 investment. She tore up the losing win tickets and discarded them.

We played the No. 4 horse in the next race. It left at 7-1, ran into a backstretch blind switch, was carried five wide around the turn, and still came on in time to be fourth. Hazel tore up tickets while I made a mark on my program to remind myself to take a close look at the No. 4 horse the next time he raced when bad racing luck might not be a factor.

We lost the eighth and ninth races, too, and on the tenth race exacta we took a $20 wheel with the No. 5 horse to win coupled with everything else in the race to run second. On an exacta bet, the bettor has to successfully forecast the order of finish of the first two horses. The finish turned out to be 3-5, upside down from our 5-3, and Hazel ripped up more tickets.

"We made $390 with only one trip to the cashier's window," she said as we left the grandstand for the valet parking area. She handed me my $1000 back and an extra $195. "I saw Jerry Collins, the one they used to call Cincinnati Red when he had hair, in the exacta line. He asked me if I was the one who'd been baling it in at the windows in spot bets. I told him no. So it can't be one of the regulars or Jerry would have known."

"Do you want to live it up at a plush hotel or would you rather go to a quiet place I know where they tune up the bedsprings every morning?" I asked Hazel when the car arrived.

"You know I'm a tuned-up-bedsprings freak," she said with a dimpled smile.

So once out on Highway 80 again I set sail for the Bay Bridge. We crossed over from Oakland to San Francisco, and I took the Fifth Street exit. Market Street had a new surface and new car tracks after having been torn up while the BART subway was installed beneath its surface.

I turned into Eddy Street and drove two blocks to the garage of the Hotel Roosevelt. The garage attendant took over the car after I unloaded our bags, and I pressed the

buzzer on a post which signaled the bellman in the hotel lobby. He came through the connecting passageway with a wheeled cart. I shepherded Hazel into the lobby while the bellman followed with our luggage stacked on the cart.

I signed Mr. and Mrs. Earl Drake on the register. I'd have used an alias without even thinking about it except that we were supposed to contact Chen Yi, the beautiful, towering Chinese girl friend of the Nassau gambler, Candy Kane. The only name that would mean anything to either was Earl Drake.

"Did you see the picture of Teddy Roosevelt above the elevators?" Hazel asked me when I rejoined her.

"I've seen it before. A hotel-keeping family has run this place and a few others in the city since just after the earthquake. No frills, not even a restaurant on the premises, but it's within walking distance of Union Square and Chinatown. The neighborhood is rough, since it's on the edge of the Tenderloin, but it's a comfortable place. A lot of retirees live here."

The bellman ushered us into Room 422. Hazel looked around after I tipped him and he departed. "It's probably all right if we're not planning on holding a dance," she said doubtfully. She looked at the bed. "That looks large enough, anyway."

"Large enough for what?"

She made a face at me before beginning to open her bags and hang her things in the larger of the room's two closets. I went to the old-fashioned wall phone beside the bed and asked the hotel switchboard operator for a number that again I had no need to look up.

"This is the survivor of the Massillon team that lost 3-0 in '58, Eddie," I said when I had my connection and recognized the bullfrog voice at the other end of the line. "I'm looking for a six-foot-four-inch Chinese girl visiting in Chinatown. Her name is Chen Yi, and she's from Nassau. Have her call me at the Roosevelt. I'm using the name Earl Drake."

"Rush job?" the bullfrog inquired.

"She may not be here long."

"Gotcha. I'll put out the word."

The bullfrog, whom I knew only as Toledo Eddie, was a wheelchair case who read Kant and Bergson, constructed elaborate mathematical puzzles, and boasted that for a price he could locate anyone in the city except in the hippie areas. Eddie disdained what he was pleased to call the great unwashed. He had fantastic pipelines everywhere else.

I took Hazel out to dinner. We went out the main entrance to Jones Street, turned right at the corner of Eddy, and walked a block to Taylor. I ushered her into Original Joe's, an Italian restaurant sandwiched between a Japanese tea garden and a hole-in-the-wall saloon. I waved aside the proffered menus and ordered the house special with two glasses of burgundy.

The special overflowed the huge plates on which it arrived. It consisted of chopped sirloin, spinach, eggs, and mushrooms appetizingly blended, and it was almost pure protein. I'd learned about it from seeing the pro wrestlers order it at Original Joe's following their Cow Palace appearances.

Hazel is a good eater, but the last few mouthfuls went down hard even for her. "Delicious," she sighed. Neither of us even wanted to think about dessert or coffee.

It was almost nine o'clock by the time we got back to the hotel. Hazel sat down on the bed and patted its surface invitingly. "You know I always like to try a new track surface," she coaxed.

"After that meal?" I protested.

But she prevailed. We undressed and tested the track surface extensively, after which I fell asleep like I'd been clubbed.

Sunlight was pouring in the windows overlooking the roof of the building next door when I woke. Hazel had obviously been up and doing for some time; half-filled coffee cups littered the room along with scattered pages of the morning paper and the day's racing form. And she was dressed. Was she dressed! For someone who puts in most of her time at the ranch in faded jeans, buckskin vest, and

cowboy boots, when Hazel hits the road she does it up right.

From her head downward, her costume consisted of a dun-colored sombrero-style hat that still managed to look feminine; sleeveless sweater reaching below her hips over a black and white checked skirt with a wide black belt and four-inch silver buckle. The fringed hem of the skirt ended considerably above her knee-length leather boots. Draped casually over her right shoulder was a serape of the same material as the skirt.

I was still blinking at this vision when Hazel sensed my movement in the bed and glanced up from the Form she was studying. "Golden Gate has a one o'clock post time, sluggard," she informed me, then rose to her feet and pirouetted before me. "How do I look?"

"Superfragimelligorgeous. Never did a bird-of-paradise assume more handsome plumage in which to do her detecting." In return for this bit of sincere flattery, she gave me a smile, warm and promising.

I shook myself awake in the shower and we went down to the garage and ransomed the car. Erikson had given me a two-by-three snapshot of the dead black, Jeffrey Grant, and I transferred this to Hazel's handbag before we reached Golden Gate Fields. She would be doing the circulating among her widespread racetrack acquaintances while I performed as handicapper.

We had lunch—breakfast for me—in the track cafeteria, and then I settled down in the sunlight which tempered the cool breeze at the end of the grandstand. Hazel returned after a swing through the paddock area and along the hardstand in front of the grandstand in time to place our doubles. We were alive after the first race, but blew the second in a three-horse picture in which our horses ran second and third.

Hazel returned again while I was still morosely studying the odds board which indicated that if either of our equine malcontents had made it to the finish line first we'd have had a hell of a fine start on the day. "I've found two people already who knew this black man as a semiregular out

here," she announced, tapping her handbag which contained Jeffrey Grant's picture. "Although not by the name Grant. Dick the Drover is sure he saw him with another black named Emory Williams who's connected with IDA. Williams is a professor from Howard University."

"A horseplaying professor," I mused. "How would The Drover know that?"

"You know how horseplayers talk to each other. They'll discuss things they wouldn't mention to their wives. A few of the IDA people make the scene here fairly regularly. The U. Cal Berkeley campus is only five miles away. This man Williams has a mustache and goatee and comes often with a young white man no one seems to know." Hazel took a book of matches from her handbag and consulted scribbled notes on the inside cover. "The white man is sandy haired, and wears heavy, dark-framed glasses, and mod clothes."

"Doesn't anyone at IDA ever work?" I asked. "Why all the horseplayers?"

"I'm sure there are just a few," Hazel said. "The mathematicians, probably. I never knew one who wasn't a gambler. They work all day with probabilities and combinations. They play games where mathematical rules and deductive logic play a large part. Games like duplicate bridge and three-dimensional chess."

"And horse racing?"

"Exactly." Hazel fished another matchbook from her handbag. "Harry Carstens says the IDA people come here with horses to play. They don't work the Form from race to race, and they don't play every race. Someone is calling the signals for them. Harry says they're getting a good percentage of winners, though not much price."

"I have a feeling that's not what Erikson wants to know." I handed Hazel my program with my selection marked for the next race. "Let's see if we can get pictured out of this one."

We didn't, because the beast finished a comfortable—for him—sixth. On the fourth and fifth races, though, the figures produced back-to-back winners, and

on the second of these Hazel, with the uncanny gift which so often seems to guide her in loading up the heavy money in the right spot, waged $300 across the board on a lovely animal that paid thirty-one dollars to win.

I returned to the form in a more expansive mood, but the figures seemed to have shot their wad on that fifth-race happy circumstance. I had nothing further until the ninth race when my selection survived a foul claim to run second and pay nine dollars in the middle.

We left the track with Hazel all smiles although she'd found out nothing more that fitted Karl Erikson's jigsaw puzzle.

CHAPTER IV

There were no messages at the hotel, from Chen Yi or anyone else. I took Hazel to dinner at Le Boeuf on Geary Street. As a cattle raiser she was delighted to walk into an expensive restaurant with a meat counter and butcher's block at its entrance displaying various cuts of beef from which the customer made his choice, indicating the thickness he wanted sliced off. Meals were paid for by the price per pound of steak selected. Hazel made our choices, a filet for herself and a sirloin for me. I was almost able to cut mine with a fork.

After dinner we walked along Geary Street to Powell and had a few drinks in a couple of the piano bars. When we were walking back to the Roosevelt, Hazel paused in front of a gaudily neoned bottomless joint. "Why don't you take me in there so I can see if those girls have something I don't have?" she asked me.

"What they have, sugarfoot, you've got more of, in spades," I told her. "Just stand in front of your mirror tonight when you reached the plucked chicken stage."

"I wonder what it actually takes to dance nude before a bunch of ogling men?" Hazel asked thoughtfully.

"A desire to keep on eating," I said. "The majority of these wigglers are divorcees raising their kids. Plus a sprinkling of narcissists cashing in on the bareass syndrome."

"You show a disconcerting familiarity with the species,

sir," Hazel said, slipping her arm through mine. "Since when did you become a sociology professor?"

"Since puberty, ma'am."

She laughed, a deep, rich sound that caused heads to turn on the street. People smiled at her. "Would I be the only woman in one of those places if you took me?"

"Of course not. Don't you realize that's where some guys take their chicks to learn how to move that thing?"

"Oh, you!" she said. We walked half a block in silence. "Earl," she began.

"Yes, dear," I said, beating her to the punch. "You move it superlatively."

"Oh, you!" she said again, but with a different timbre. A nice difference.

But after that buildup we sacked in decorously enough when we reached the hotel with only a bit of snuggling.

I slipped out of bed in the morning while Hazel's red hair still flowed over the opposite pillow. I went down to the lobby and walked across the street to Foster's Cafeteria for grapefruit and coffee, then went back to the lobby's pay phone booths and called Karl Erikson, using the unlisted number I'd removed from Hazel's handbag.

Listening to the phone ring, I wondered what kind of setup Erikson had here in San Francisco. The last time I'd had any occasion to do some extensive phone-calling to him, he'd been behind a supposed import-export company in a fifteenth floor office on New York City's Fifth Avenue. That place had been a bank of esoteric electronic surveillance equipment, including a machine that recorded speech on graph paper for voice-print identification.

"Yes?" Erikson's voice said when I was about ready to hang up.

"Is the government paying you to sleep till noon, Big Brother?" I needled him.

"What'd you find out?" he asked with his usual directness.

I reported Hazel's findings, and it didn't take long. "We're thinking of flying back to the ranch tomorrow," I said to test his reaction.

He didn't come on strong exactly, but he came on. "Give it a couple more days," he said. "Tell Hazel to try to rub up against this Williams from IDA or the mod type. I need to know if there's any kind of tie-in between Jeffrey Grant and that complex in Berkeley, or anyone associated with it."

"So you can go out there and stamp around like a rutting elephant with one foot in quicksand and ask questions?"

"Sometimes you show a certain primitive intelligence, Earl."

"Hazel says the only thing that makes the IDA horseplaying even a little bit out of the ordinary is the size of the bets."

"And the fact that the same person doesn't always make them. It suggests a group operation, and I wouldn't call that ordinary."

"According to you, IDA is a group operation," I pointed out.

"I hardly believe the Pentagon envisioned sponsoring a group operation at Golden Gate Fields," he said drily. "Keep in touch."

The connection was gone.

One seldom has the last word with Karl Erikson during a phone conversation.

I went out of the hotel again and turned left on Jones. I walked three blocks to Market where I turned left once more to Sixth Street. I had two locations in mind for replacing the Smith & Wesson .38 Karl Erikson had wrapped around the ranch's iron clothespole, and it was time I took care of it. South of Market on Sixth was a pawnshop that specialized in guns, and on a parallel block on Fourth Street there was another. I'd try the Sixth Street location first because I'd done business there before.

Before leaving the hotel room for breakfast that morning I'd retrieved my shoulder holster from my bag and slipped it on. From age seventeen I'd been accustomed to wearing it like my underwear, with a jacket or sport coat

to conceal it despite the afflictions of hot weather or humidity.

I walked into the shop briskly; browsers are one category, buyers another, and by their speed afoot shall ye know them. "Charlie around?" I asked the thin, bald man behind the counter.

He shook his shiny head. "Charlie's on a buying trip in Canada," he replied.

"Don't you mean a selling trip in Mexico?"

"A comedian so early in the morning," he said.

"I've been using a Smith & Wesson .38 police special for a long time," I got down to business. "But I'm thinking of changing to an automatic. What do you recommend?"

He shrugged. "What do you use it for?"

"Shooting."

He stared, then frowned. "What did you have in mind for a replacement?" he asked after deciding to ignore my levity.

"Something as close to it as possible in an automatic. I'd done some thinking about the S&W 9mm."

He nodded. "An excellent choice. It shoots the same 9mm Parabellum cartridge as the Luger."

"That gives it less stopping power than the special," I said, "but I suppose that could be rectified with hand loads."

"Exactly." The counterman beamed now that he felt sure he was conversing with a fellow gun nut. "Factory loads have a copper jacket which makes a relatively neat hole. Hand loads fire a trifle 'hot' with a soft, hollow-nosed bullet that mushrooms to three-quarters of an inch or more. Much greater knockdown and crippling power. Superb for—ah—varmint hunting."

I tested him. "I've heard somewhere that the 9mm automatic had jamming problems."

"That was eight or nine years ago when it first came out," the counterman assured me earnestly. "As I recall, the 9mm automatic was originally designed to fire revolver ammunition, a factor that would present problems to any automatic. But there's no problems today. It's a fantasti-

cally accurate lightweight handgun. And it has an eight-shot magazine."

"I'm aware of it," I said. "I'd like to see one."

"Just a moment," he said, and brushed through a hanging curtain leading to a back room.

I ran my eye over the handguns displayed in the showcases while I waited. A few were attractive looking for one reason or another, but none had the overall features of the 9mm. For one thing, there was the ammunition, which could be purchased anywhere.

Some cartridges are named for identification purposes and aren't always descriptive. A .38 caliber pistol cartridge actually measures .35 caliber. The .30-06 rifle cartridge was introduced in 1906 and retains its name to avoid confusion with other .30 caliber cartridges. The S&W 9mm shoots what it advertises.

The counterman returned and placed a mint-condition S&W 9mm automatic on the glass counter-top. It was still slick-looking with factory oil. Alongside it he placed two extra clips. "There you are," he said. "A locked breech, double-action, self-loading little beauty. Only twenty-six-and-a half ounces in weight."

I picked it up and hefted it. It felt half the weight of the .38 special, although it was probably a bit more than that. It felt awkward in my hand, but any new gun was going to feel that way. Practice would change that.

"Automatics have many advantages," the gun salesman continued with his pitch. "They're much flatter; they have greater fire power due to larger capacity and quicker reloading; they have greater accuracy due to the hammer being cocked automatically after each firing; they have far more safety features; they can be repaired quickly with replacement parts and few tools while revolvers have many fitted parts that aren't really interchangeable; they have—"

"How much?" I interrupted him.

He glanced around the shop to make sure that we were alone. "Three hundred dollars," he said.

I knew the automatic retailed for eighty to ninety-five

dollars, depending upon supply and demand, but I was glad to hear him say $300. The minute he said it, both of us knew I was buying more than a gun.

I took out my handkerchief, wiped the film of oil from the automatic, held open my jacket, and thrust the 9mm into my shoulder holster. It fitted loosely. I tried drawing it a few times. No question about it, the fit was far too loose. Vaulting over a barbed-wire fence, I could even lose the weapon.

The counterman was watching me. "You don't still use a shoulder holster in this day and age?" he asked me. His tone was pitying.

"It's been good enough to this point," I said.

He reached down under the counter and produced a belt holster. "This is a stripped-down Bianchi for big self-loaders like the 9mm," he said. "Cross-draw, since you're used to it, heavy saddle skirting leather, all seams lock-stitched with heavy waxed linen thread, rivet reinforcement at all corners. The holster is looped on the belt to prevent sliding and there's pockets for two extra clips."

I unbuttoned my jacket and fastened the belt around my waist. The embossed leather felt stiff enough to be a kidney supporter for a motorcyclist, but a sagging belt has filled more graveyards than the French and Indian Wars. Since I needed to get used to the new weapon anyway, getting used to the belt and holster at the same time shouldn't be too much of a chore.

"Have the buttons on your jackets moved over a quarter-inch," the salesman advised. "That will allow a comfortably loose fit yet one hundred percent concealment."

"How much for the belt holster?"

"A hundred and fifty."

Overpriced again. I took out my wallet and counted five one-hundred-dollar bills down onto the counter. "Load the gun and the clips, throw in the rest of the box of ammo, and the change is yours," I said.

We completed the transaction, and I walked out to the street. The subject of gun registration hadn't been men-

tioned. For the price I'd paid, there was never a possibility that it would be. When I got time, I'd sight in the automatic and do enough practicing with it that both automatic and holster would become as much a part of me as my skin.

Three days later the situation at Golden Gate Fields hadn't improved. We won a few bets and lost a few, but Hazel's racetrack friends couldn't seem to come up with any more information of the type likely to interest Erikson. One afternoon Hazel learned that the black professor, Emory Williams, was at the track, but the man who told her was just leaving, and no one else was able to point him out.

We were having no better luck locating Chen Yi. Twice we strolled through Chinatown at night, along the length of lower Grant Street, but we failed to find a tall, beautiful Chinese female in brocaded silk. I called Toledo Eddie once, and he admitted that while it had sounded easy at first, he was doing no better than we were.

I was getting impatient at the lack of progress. I have an aversion to remaining too long in one place, at least while out in public view. The only thing that kept me from making an active effort to break up the situation was the knowledge that Hazel was enjoying herself. She was a real clotheshorse when she had a chance to be, which she certainly didn't at the ranch.

Hazel came back to my spot in the grandstand after the fourth race. The fifth was for maiden three-and four-year-olds, a really terrible conglomeration of so-called horseflesh. "You could beat anything in this field running with your pants down," I told Hazel. "And I could run second. Let's skip this one and go upstairs to the bar. I'll spring for a drink."

"You've just handicapped yourself a winner, Earl," she agreed.

On the way to the bar Hazel kept bumping into people because she wasn't watching where she was going. I knew she was trying to spot someone fitting the description of

Emory Williams or his sandy-haired, mod-clothes-wearing friend. I finally had to take her arm and lead her to get us to the bar.

I ordered us drinks, then pointed to dark clouds overhanging the hills to the north. The air was heavy with humidity. "If we get a hard shower before the seventh, I think I've got a winner," I said. "There's a quitting sprinter entered at a mile and a sixteenth. He loves the mud, and with nothing to run with him early, he's likely to wing it all the way. The bettors will lay off because he's been running out of gas at six furlongs, and he'll really be a price."

Hazel nodded as she sipped her drink. Her expression was troubled. "I don't feel I've really contributed much to the solution of Karl's problem, Earl," she said.

"You've done what you could." I seized the opportunity to lay down a retreat pattern. "The way I see it, there never was much of anything to develop."

"There's no question there's a betting pool originating at IDA," Hazel went on, "and someone connected with it is a real horseman. Everyone says they come up with solid horses but not much price."

"Look, if you found out twice as much as you have already, how could it help Erikson? Let's rack it up and get back to the ranch."

"But San Francisco's so nice!" Hazel protested. "I love shopping in the morning, coming out here in the afternoon, and exploring Broadway and Chinatown at night. And you've taken me to Edinburgh Castle, and Big Al's, and Finocchio's, and Mooney's Irish Pub. I like it in San Francisco, and we don't take a vacation all that often."

So I lost round one on a forfeit. "Well, anyway," I began, and fell silent when I saw I had lost Hazel's attention. I looked in the direction she was staring, and saw Karl Erikson entering the bar. Hazel started to rise from her chair, and I reached across and grabbed her arm. "Let him make the first move!" I whispered.

"A bottle of Heineken's," I heard him say to the bartender.

Erikson's presence meant one of two things: he was throwing the hand in, or he had something for Hazel or me to do. A racetrack bar wasn't the worst place for a clandestine meeting. Everyone was concentrating on a quick drink and the next winner.

Erikson looked around after his first swallow of beer, did an apparent double-take at sight of us, waved, then as an afterthought picked up his beer and came over to our table. "What a pleasant surprise!" he said in his heavy voice, sitting down.

"Isn't it, though," I said with emphasis on the irony.

Erikson ignored it. He lowered his voice before speaking again. "Your information has been very helpful, Hazel," he said.

"Just what use are you making of Hazel's great help?" I asked pointedly.

"The total picture is being monitored from Washington, of course," Erikson said blandly. "The feeling there seems to be strengthening the viewpoint that there's a link between IDA and the Aqueduct affair."

"And you agree?"

"I didn't say that. But as long as Washington feels that way, I have a problem that may require some outside help," he said. "Outside government, I mean."

I could feel it coming, and I thrust my oar in again. "With your contacts, Karl, I know it will be no problem for you. Let us know when you've wrapped it up and maybe we can have dinner together some night before you go back to Washington."

But his attention was focused upon Hazel. "I have orders to put someone inside IDA immediately, someone who won't disturb the already delicate balance between militant students ticked off at Pentagon support of IDA and the IDA staff itself. It can't be me, because I'm known to top IDA personnel."

Hazel started to say something but I made my voice override hers. "Forget it, man. You're spinning your wheels."

"Washington feels it should be a woman," Erikson said

to Hazel. "It would take a man six months to buddy up to anyone and learn something. An attractive woman wouldn't have that problem."

"An attractive woman could wind up with her attractive tail in a gate," I said sourly.

"There's no problem," Erikson insisted. "Perfect cover will be provided." He was looking at Hazel again. "We do have one woman in the organization with the proper technical background, but she doesn't know an osselet from a snaffle bit. She'd blow her cover with the people we really want to talk to within twenty-four hours."

"I'd like to try it," Hazel said eagerly.

"No!" I blared. The bartender turned his head and looked at me. I held up three fingers and the bartender began preparing another round. Simmering, I stared out through the glassed-in front of the grandstand through which I could see a heavy curtain of rain falling.

"We can work around the technical requirement with you by shielding you with security barriers," Erikson continued to Hazel. "Your racetrack knowledge is what can't be faked."

"What kind of cover story would get us over the technical hurdle?" Hazel asked, and I knew we were launched on an uncertain path.

The bartender sent a waiter over with our drinks, and Erikson waited until the man left. "It would be airtight," Erikson said. "We'll set you up as a member of the Strategic Concepts Evaluation Group in Washington, a cloistered but not unknown special studies team under the direct supervision of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We'll arrange for the Department of Defense and IDA headquarters in Washington to advise the Berkeley IDA group of our pretty technician's task," Erikson turned the full candlepower of his smile upon Hazel, "and ask that they furnish all assistance possible. Not only will the door be ajar, there'll be a length of red carpet leading to it." He stopped, looking pleased with himself.

"No," I said. Out on the track the rain was falling hard.

"I'll do it," Hazel said to Erikson.

"Great!" he enthused.

"Like hell you'll do it!" I snapped.

"We can meet downtown and I'll give you more details," Karl said to Hazel. He started on his second beer.

"We'll talk about it," Hazel promised. "Earl has a horse in the seventh race, Karl. Why don't you let him bet it for you?"

"A horse?" Erikson echoed.

"A selection," I amended it. Erikson's disconcerted look was almost worth the aggravation I was feeling. "Don't look so much like a preacher in a whorehouse, man. Fork over a little cash. Like fifty."

He had to look in three different pockets before he found any money. Karl Erikson is used to operating by signing government chits. He finally came up with two crumpled bills, a one and a twenty. Hazel calmly appropriated the twenty and Erikson watched with more apprehension than he'd showed in front of a Cuban militiaman's rifle in Havana as the twenty disappeared into Hazel's handbag.

We led him back to our spot at the end of the grandstand and sat down. I was in a foul mood, because Hazel was in a bubbly frame of mind that denoted the female intrigued by a new idea. I watched the sprinter open on the board at twelve-to-one, climb to twenty, to twenty-five, to thirty, to forty, and to forty-five.

"Which—ah—horse are we wagering on?" Erikson wanted to know.

"Number Five," Hazel told him.

Erikson looked at the board, and his eyebrows climbed ludicrously. "Number Five? Am I reading the—ah—odds properly?"

"You are," I said. I'd expected a price, but this was ridiculous. "Take a look at that thing in the paddock and make sure it's got more than three legs," I said to Hazel when she got up to go to the windows.

Erikson and I sat in silence. The race went off before she returned. The race started right in front of us, and Number Five went to the front so fast I thought for a sec-

ond he'd beaten the gate. He was on top by five going around the clubhouse turn.

Erikson glanced at me. "That's our horse in front?"

"That's the horse."

The sprinter widened out by ten lengths in the backstretch, by twelve on the far turn. Beside me Erikson began to whoop and holler and to jump up and down. In the homestretch the boy kept looking over his shoulder in the pouring rain, but nothing ever came closer. Erikson pounded my shoulder numb and yelled himself hoarse as the sprinter went under the wire the easiest winner I'd seen in a long time.

Hazel flew up to us joyously as the tote board lit up to show $99.40 on the front end. In her right hand she clutched a stack of yellow-and-blue ten-dollar win tickets. Erikson grabbed her and they waltzed around on the cement like a couple of lunatics. "How much did we have on that mustang?" I asked Hazel when the waltz slowed down.

"Enough to pay for a little frivolity!" she answered happily before kissing me. She handed Karl two tickets. "You'll collect nine hundred and ninety four dollars, Karl."

"Nine—" He looked at me. "How long as this been going on?"

"You're hooked, man," I told him. "You'll be out here tomorrow and all the rest of the tomorrows."

"How often do you do that?" he persisted.

"Pick a horse at a price like that? Once every ten years."

"Wasn't it beautiful?" Hazel kept repeating ecstatically.

Any scrounging for a winner after that would have been the anticlimax of the century, so I went with Hazel and Erikson to the cashiers' windows while they collected. I'm not saying I would have wanted the horse to drop dead five yards short of the finish line, but it didn't make me the happiest man in the world that Erikson, who had contributed exactly nothing, should profit to that extent. Worse,

the man was actively engaged in promoting Hazel into real trouble.

I built up another head of steam thinking about it while I waited for them, but Hazel forestalled me when they joined me. "Nice going, horseman," she said, kissing me again.

"Yes, thanks, horseman," Erikson said with a wide grin. He had a sheaf of bills in his right hand. He looked at Hazel. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Post time is one p.m.," I said.

"About the other thing," he said impatiently, and walked off into the crowd.

Evidently not even a hundred-dollar winner was going to make a horse player out of Karl Erikson.

I garaged the car at the Hotel Roosevelt while Hazel went up to our room. I stopped to get a pack of cigarettes from the machine in the lobby. The change slot was worn and my quarters kept slipping through. I had to put them in four or five times before the machine retained them and produced the cigarettes.

When I entered our room, Hazel was just turning away from the telephone with a wide smile. "I just called the ranch to check on things," she said, "and there was a message from Chen Yi." She waved a piece of paper at me. "She's staying with friends named Wah on California Street. It's in the second apartment up the hill from the Cathay House on Grant. She didn't leave a phone number, but why don't we go and visit with her?"

"She's probably the only one there who speaks English," I theorized. "I've got one thing to do first, so why don't you take a cab to the place where she's staying and I'll join you there shortly."

"What are you up to now?" Hazel demanded suspiciously.

"Just something I should have taken care of before now."

I could see she didn't believe me, but she didn't say so.

We both changed and went downstairs where I had the desk man call a cab for Hazel. When it carried her off, I went back through the lobby to the bank of pay phones in the long corridor leading to the garage.

I dialed Erikson's number and waited. "Drake," I said when he answered. "I'm coming over to talk to you."

"You're talking to me now, Earl."

"Face to face, buster. What's your address? I want to watch your expression while you're lying to me some more."

He laughed and told me how to find him. I went out to the garage to get the car. The attendant was unhappy about retrieving the rental from its third-floor parking slot so soon after taking it up there on the elevator, but I soothed him with a tip. Following Erikson's directions, I drove west on Eddy to Van Ness, then stayed on it all the way to Fort Mason. The last part was all downhill.

One thing about the military: they don't want anyone to get lost. There were guideposts on every corner pointing to the various buildings, and every building was identified by a number and a sign. I had no difficulty finding the Officers' Mess and the parking lot beside it. I put the rental car in the back row as Erikson had suggested. The break in the shrubbery leading to the concealed path was exactly where he said it would be.

I followed the once-graveled walk which led downhill behind the Officers' Club to a long, low building constructed entirely of cinder block. Light behind narrow windows high up under the eaves of the flat roof illuminated clearly reinforcing wire imbedded in thick glass. I could see Spanish-style iron-bar grills in front of the windows which were not for decoration.

I walked past two sets of flush-metal double doors until I came to the single steel door with the identifying amber light overhead that Erikson had mentioned. I pushed an oversized concave button below directions which said: Press for Entry. Nothing happened. I pushed again. A voice reached me from a loudspeaker concealed behind a small louvered grill set in the steel door casing. "Step in-

side and face to the right!" a scratchy, metallic voice ordered. It sounded like a recording.

The steel door swung open noiselessly when I complied. It had to be by mechanical effort and not human, because the door was solid steel at least eight inches thick. I moved inside onto a metal plate that fit flush with the floor. The outer door closed behind me, and I found myself in a box-like entryway, sealed off ahead of me by another steel door. When I looked to the right I saw a wall studded with regularly-spaced apertures which I guessed contained sensors of some type.

This was verified when a drawer, similar to those used at drive-in bank windows, slid out of the wall. "Remove your weapon and deposit it in the receptacle. Mr. Erikson is waiting for you in Room W, third door on the right." This voice was definitely human, but it had no warmth.

Reluctantly I placed my automatic in the extended drawer. The drawer closed immediately, and I waited while the sensors scanned me again for additional metal. Then the steel door ahead of me opened, and I passed through its vault-like aperture. I passed two doors from behind which came clattering noises and the smell of ozone. The entire building hummed serenely as though it were sitting on top of a tremendous power plant.

Room W was an office the likes of which I'd never seen before. It appeared that Erikson had commandeered an electronics laboratory. Oscilloscopes along with panels which were a maze of multicolored lights and banks of switches left me completely ignorant of their purpose, but I was sure that the tall console with spinning, jerking reels of broad-based magnetic tape was a cryptographic coder of some kind.

The only familiar items in the room were a huge desk and the inevitable black, white, and red telephones which —on past performance, at least—gave Erikson direct and priority access to special switchboards connecting with very important phone numbers in the nation's capitol.

Erikson was standing behind the desk, enjoying my gawking around the room. I was mad at myself for com-

ing. In a way it was all part of his con game, letting me see the place—which he hadn't needed to, certainly—to let me see how important his mission was. But I wasn't having any. "There's something phony in the way you keep digging into the Aqueduct helicopter caper," I began.

"Where's the sweat?" he asked.

"Why are you so intent on shoving your nose and Hazel's ass into what's essentially a criminal investigation?"

"I go where I'm sent, Earl. Someone in Washington evidently feels it's more than a criminal investigation."

"Even if you could get her inside this Institute of Defense Analysis setup, she'd never be able—"

"I'll get her in," he interrupted me. His tone was supremely confident. "It's all set."

His certainty derailed my opposition momentarily, and I stared at the big blond man in the multigimmicked room.

CHAPTER V

Erikson continued before I could speak. "The job will require her to have free access to all IDA facilities including the classified library and the computer areas. The last is important because her project, supposedly, will be to make use of them. But I've learned there's no time available on the IDA computers for the next two weeks, so she'll have that long to fish around out there. And she can be using those two weeks to complete the computer programs to feed into the machines when scheduled time opens up."

"Hazel a computer mathematician? You're out of your mind, Karl. She couldn't even fake it."

"She won't have to fake it." Erikson's tone was positive. "We'll provide all the programs, and she'll only have to copy some math symbols and formulas, complicated ones. When she passes them on to the chief of computer operations for checking and conversion into machine language by some of the junior technicians, I guarantee you that her reputation as a research fellow will be solidly confirmed."

"But how is she supposed to handle any questions that come up?"

"No problem," Erikson insisted. "If anyone starts talking to her about her supposed job, or mentions technical terms in connection with her project, all she has to do to shut them off is to suggest that discussion would be a violation of security regulations."

"I still don't think you're taking into regard possible consequences."

He gave me an infuriatingly superior smile. "If you're that concerned, I could arrange for you to go along with her."

"How, for God's sake?"

"Simple. As her assistant. The pecking order in ascending importance around a computer operation consists of key punch operators, usually women, then programmers, coders, computer operators, and systems analysts. You could pass yourself off as a coder assigned to Hazel's project, and act antisocial to avoid any contacts that might expose your technical deficiency." Erikson paused. "What are you shaking your head about?"

"It's a better package," I admitted, "but you know what really bugs me about this whole thing? The deceased Jeffrey Grant and his connection with the Black Panthers."

"Ex-connection, even when he was still alive."

"Yeah, but if the Panthers bounced him, he must really have been something else. I don't like Hazel even getting close to that kind of action."

"Hazel is hardly a babe in arms," Erikson pointed out. "And she seems willing to cooperate."

"Because you've appealed to her patriotism," I countered. "If I'm any good as a persuader, she's going to change her mind. This thing could take off in any direction."

"The boy who cried wolf." Erikson moved out from behind his desk. "I'm expecting a visitor, Earl. Do you mind leaving by the other door?"

"The bum's rush," I said.

"Can I reach you at the Roosevelt?"

"Not tonight. Hazel and I are socializing in Chinatown. Remember Chen Yi? In Nassau?"

"Am I likely to forget that beautiful Amazon?"

"I didn't know you cared, Karl. I think that's the first kind word I've ever heard you say about a female. Except Hazel. Well, Chen Yi's in town with her boyfriend, Candy Kane. Hazel's with them now, and I'm on my way."

"Can I reach you there by phone?"

"Why the hell would you want to reach me there?"

"I have no idea," Erikson said blandly. "I'd merely like to have the capability."

Somewhat reluctantly I handed him the note with Hazel's scribbled directions for locating Chen Yi which Hazel had taken down during her phone call to Ely. "You sound to me like a man counting hatched chickens, Karl. Prematurely, may I say?"

"You may say." He smiled. "Goodnight, Earl."

"Not goodnight yet." I held out my hand. "I arrived here with a gun."

"Ah, yes." He went to a row of metal boxes protruding inward from the wall, lifted a cover, and retrieved my automatic. "How do you like it compared to the special?" he asked as he handed it to me.

"I think I'm going to like it better." I slipped it into my belt holster. "I practice drawing for an hour every morning, and I've had two sport coats made by a tailoring specialist who drapes them on the shoulders so cleverly the coats can hang open unbuttoned without sagging to reveal the holster. And I've gone out to the Western Addition a few times to see a guy who for years was a bird dog for the Caswell Equipment Company of Minneapolis."

Erikson raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"They install pistol and rifle ranges," I explained, "and the guy has one in his basement. I sighted in the automatic there, adjusting the front sight until the thing was shooting where I was looking. I don't use a sight often, but it's nice to have it calibrated when I do. I also oiled the outside of the new belt-holster and graphited the inside. I've had people argue with me that graphiting doesn't do anything except put an extra shine on the steel, but I'm still walking around and some of the people who argued against it aren't."

"Infinite pains," Erikson commented. He shook his head slowly. "All the years you were channeled wrong —"

"Don't knock it if you haven't tried it. Goodnight," I echoed his previous farewell.

I left via the side door and had to circle the building to get back onto the path. Once back in the rental car, I drove to Chinatown. I parked around the corner from the Cathay House and cramped the wheels to the curb. I climbed the steep California Street hill and entered the second apartment building. The mail boxes in the vestibule announced only one family named Wah. The door was the electric buzzer type. I pressed the button and waited.

Instead of the admitting buzz I expected, the door was opened silently by a young Chinese girl, about ten years old. She was wearing a kimono-style robe which seemed more Japanese than Chinese. The girl studied me gravely for an instant, then bowed deeply from the waist, and indicated that I was to enter.

The door closed behind us as we walked down a long corridor. The little girl opened a door, bowed low to me again, waited until I moved inside, then closed the door after me without coming in herself. I found myself in the tiny hallway of a small apartment with the succulent aroma of good cooking filling my nostrils.

I heard Hazel's voice immediately, with Chen Yi's as counterpoint. Directly ahead of me, Candy Kane stood at the living room window looking down at the street. The powerfully built black man turned at the sound of the closing door and surveyed me. "Well, hello!" he rumbled, and held out his hand.

I thought he sounded subdued. I walked to the window and we shook hands after I placed both of mine in Candy's extended paw to minimize his customary bone-crushing grip. "How's it going?" I asked.

"Fine, fine," he said with an attempt at heartiness. But he didn't look as though it was going fine. His eyes were bloodshot, and seemed dull. Despite the fact his ruffled shirt was fuchsia and his bellbottoms purple, in contrast to his usual high-style appearance, even Candy's clothing seemed subdued. "The girls are in the bedroom," he indicated.

I moved toward the door he had pointed toward. Chen

Yi and Hazel were seated on the bed, and predictably, Hazel was in Chinese costume. Every time she and Chen Yi get together, the first order of business seems to be getting Hazel out of her occidental clothes.

Chen Yi rose from the bed, a bright, welcoming smile enhancing her superlative, warm-ivory features. Her hands slipped into the opposite loose-flowing sleeves of her tunic, and she made me a formal little bow despite the fact that since I'd first met her there had never been any formality between us. "Ten thousand thousand welcomes to our borrowed humble abode, Earl," she greeted me.

The bow reminded me of the little Chinese girl who had opened the outside door. "Who's the cute doorman?" I asked.

"The niece of the friend who loaned us the apartment," Chen Yi explained. "Excuse me, I must check the kitchen."

"Chen Yi is preparing the dinner," Hazel explained as I sat down on the bed beside her after the Chinese girl left the room.

"I wanted to take us all out to dinner," I protested. "To celebrate that ninety-nine dollar winner if nothing else."

"She wants to do it, Earl. It will be an authentic Cantonese dinner party."

I patted Hazel's butt which was almost transparently evident in her exotic costume. Chen Yi walked back into the bedroom and caught me in the act. The tall Chinese girl smiled, perhaps recalling—as I did –that her own backside wasn't unknown to me. The second day I knew her, Candy—in a fit of temper—had caned her, British-style, in my presence. And Chen Yi, although physically capable of preventing it—later I saw her wipe out completely a gun-toting type with her competence at *kung fu*, the deadlier Chinese version of karate—had accepted the caning with oriental stoicism because Candy was her man.

"Ten minutes more," Chen Yi said, her smile expanding until it softened the lines of her classic beauty.

I went out and rejoined Candy who was still standing at the window. "How's it going?" I asked before realizing I

was repeating the question I'd asked upon entering the apartment.

He turned around and sat down upon a semicircular lounge, inching a Chinese dragon screen to one side with his foot. "I'm just back from Vegas," he said, and shook his bullet head. "Bad show."

Candy was a professional gambler who had been on a losing streak ever since I'd known him. We'd been on a gambling flight to Las Vegas together which was hijacked. I knew Candy dated his current bad luck from that event. His nerves seemed rubbed raw.

"What comes next?" I asked.

He shook his head again. "Back to Nassau again, although I don't really know why. I've blown the game at my place. Couldn't pay off any longer." He attempted to rally with more of a show of his usual exuberance. "But I'll come up with something."

"We're ready," Chen Yi called from the kitchen.

We joined the women around the small table overburdened with steaming dishes from which Chen Yi filled our plates liberally. Rice wine and jasmine tea were at each place setting. I ate cautiously, discovering at once that some Cantonese dishes were highly seasoned. I drenched the more glowing internal hot spots with dosages of wine and tea, but my stomach still erupted with miniature explosions.

But the more I ate the more I enjoyed it. Chen Yi beamed as she filled my plate again. I noticed that Candy paid more attention to his wine glass than he did his food. We adjourned to the living room afterward, and I kicked off my shoes and relaxed on the sofa with my stockinged feet propped up on a lacquered and ivory-inlaid ornate Chinese coffee table.

Chen Yi served Metaxa brandy, and I remembered it as Candy's favorite after-dinner libation. When he took the pony glass from her, I saw that Candy's hand was shaking. The troubled-looking black man and I sipped the mellow brandy while Chen Yi and Hazel sat on the floor facing each other, knees almost touching. Their previous

bedroom dialogue continued in the same lively undertone, interspersed with mirthful giggles and ripples of laughter. But twice I caught Chen Yi glancing at the silent Candy with a worried look on her beautiful face.

A telephone rang in the bedroom, and Chen Yi rose from the floor with lithe, effortless ease, reminiscent of the first time I'd seen her when she'd been working out on a gym mat with the brutally strong Candy, and holding her own. We could hear her answering the phone, and then she appeared in the doorway, holding out the phone toward me. "It's for you, Earl."

Hazel looked surprised. "Erikson," I explained as I rose to my feet. "He's the only one who knows we're here."

"Sorry to interrupt the social hour, Earl, but something's come up," Erikson said when I took the phone. There was a clicking, clattering noise in the background that made it difficult to hear him.

"What the hell is all that racket?" I asked.

"Is Hazel there?" he asked in return.

"Yes."

"Get her to the telephone so both of you can listen."

I beckoned to Hazel who joined me. "Hi, Karl," she said.

"Regarding the proposed job in Berkeley," Erikson began against the sound of the chunking, clunking background noise. A bell 'dinged' on a high-pitched note, and I realized that the sounds came from a teletype machine.

"Yes, Karl?" Hazel said, listening closely.

"Washington's temperature has risen and they'd like immediate action. A courier is coming in from the airport now with your credentials and cover material, if you take the job," Erikson continued. "Will you do it?"

"No, she won't," I said.

"Of course I will!" Hazel said.

"For this particular type of job, Hazel, the principal has to state willingness to serve in the presence of a witness. You have just done this."

"You goddam weasel, Erikson!" I started in on him.

"I accept," Hazel cut me off. "Now what do I do?"

"Have Earl come here to the office and sign for the courier's package. He knows where it is."

"You sign for the package," I growled. "Or are you too busy plugging yourself in on a tap between the IDA and Washington ends of the teletype circuit I hear in the background? Or are you busy having closed circuit television installed in our room at the hotel?"

"I can't sign for it," Erikson said. "And the only reason you can is because I knew you wouldn't let Hazel go without you, so I made you a part of the package. The individual taking custody from the courier has to sign a receipt for registered documents."

"I thought you said these papers weren't classified now?"

"Not classified, but still registered. It's the old red-tape-paperwork game. There's no way of getting around it. How about working within the rules for once?"

"He'll be there, Karl," Hazel said.

"I won't be here when you meet the courier, but I've described you to him. Once Hazel bones up on the contents of the package, IDA will accept you both as the JCS-sponsored pair from Washington."

"Why can't you meet the courier, too?" I asked.

Erikson hesitated. "Washington has developed independent information concerning the two men you mentioned in connection with the Commodore Bar in Oakland, Tom Carter and Roy Perry. I'm on my way over there now to verify it."

"You're not going over to Catlett Street alone?"

"It's an emergency assignment."

"Who's the birdbrain in Washington asking you to play Russian roulette with a single-shot pistol? D'you realize that Catlett Street neighborhood is off limits to anyone not a regular part of the scene, white or black? And that includes the Oakland police in anything less than armored vehicles. You'd be about as inconspicuous as Mr. Universe in the Miss America contest."

"I go where I'm sent," Erikson said to me, not for the

first time. "Don't sweat it. Just meet the courier here." There was a click as the connection was broken.

I avoided looking at Hazel as I hung up the phone. I knew she was bursting with questions as she followed me into the living room. Chen Yi spoke first, however. "That was the big blond man you torched out of the jail in Nassau?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"That's the man," I agreed.

Candy was looking at me. "Did I hear you say he was goin' to the Commodore Bar on Catlett Street in the East Bay?" he asked. His words were slurred. The level of the brandy bottle indicated he hadn't been idle while Hazel and I were on the phone. I nodded, and he shook his head. "The man is crazy."

"I think so, too." I spoke to Hazel. "After I sign for the package, I'll stop off at the Roosevelt and leave it in the safe, then go over to Oakland and join Erikson. You stay here with Chen Yi until I get back."

"Why don't you go with him, Candy?" Chen Yi said quietly.

It was a development I hadn't expected, nor was I sure I welcomed it. At the moment, Candy gave the appearance of a very brittle piece of crockery.

Candy roused himself at Chen Yi's words. "Eh?" he mumbled. Then he rose to his feet, flexing his heavy shoulders. "Why not?" he asked himself. "Might even be entertaining." He went into the bedroom.

"His machismo is hurt," Chen Yi explained apologetically. "He has not liked himself for two months. It's not good for him to sit around, drinking."

Second thought had me feeling better about Candy accompanying me. He was the right color, for one thing, and next to Erikson he was the strongest man I knew, a real bull. He came out of the bedroom in a purple jacket and matching bowler hat, always the clothes horse.

Candy and I left the apartment. We walked down the hill to Grant Street, and I gave the black man three twenty-dollar bills. "I don't know how long I'm going to

be," I explained, "so why don't you take a cab from here to the Commodore Bar? I'd feel a little better if I knew you were where you could keep an eye on Erikson."

"Well, okay," Candy said. He looked more animated than at any moment since I'd first seen him staring out the apartment window down into the street.

He flagged down a cab, an easy matter in the thickly flowing pedestrian traffic in Chinatown, and climbed in.

I walked around the corner to the rental car and drove to Fort Mason.

An hour later I was driving slowly along Catlett Street after leaving the package for Hazel in the Roosevelt safe. I'd had to wait five minutes for the courier, which gave me time to work up a temperature about a note Erikson had left for me.

"Didn't want to say this on the phone," he'd scrawled. "Target actually abandoned Pacific Fruit Company warehouse three blocks north of Commodore Bar. Headquarters for outfit, probably subversive, calling themselves Black Knights for Freedom. Follow through if necessary."

"If necessary" meant if anything happened to Karl Erikson.

When I left the package in the Roosevelt safe, I detoured to the pay phones and called the Commodore Bar in Oakland. I asked for a man in a purple jacket and bowler hat, and in a moment Candy was on the line. "Listen, don't talk," I said. "He's at the abandoned Pacific Fruit Company warehouse three blocks north of you. I'm on my way now."

"Wondered why I couldn't find him," Candy grunted. "See you there."

The night was perfect for Erikson's purpose, but not for mine, which was finding him. Chilling fog from the main Bay area had cut visibility to a half-block. Street lights, high-mounted on splintery poles so far apart they were almost strangers to each other, were mere dots of incandescence surrounded by halos in the thick mist.

The fog muffled sounds and deepened shadows to a

point where I had difficulty in identifying one building from another. Most were worn brick with the common patina of a grimy coating of airborne industrial wastes, compounded by broken windows and sagging doors.

The car rolled forward slowly as I tried to read the building signs. The entire shabby atmosphere was oppressive. I reached toward my belt to make sure the new automatic was riding freely in its holster. There were no pedestrians in the area, a telling fact in itself.

Four pale street lights ahead I found what I was looking for. A two-story office building and a four-story warehouse were separated by a narrow alley. Above the ground floor windows of the warehouse a weatherbeaten sign spelled out Pacific Fruit Company in the ornate gilt lettering of the 1900's.

I continued to the end of the block, rounded the corner, and parked. I sat quietly for a moment, the car window cranked halfway down, listening for any sound that might override the familiar street noises, but there was nothing except the crash of a garbage can cover dumped by a marauding cat in a tenement alleyway across the street. The moist breeze also brought the distant sound of fog horns and buoy bells.

I got out of the car and walked back to the corner. There was still no one in sight, and I headed for the alley entrance between the Pacific Fruit Company office and warehouse. As I approached the alley, the sound of mingled voices drifted out to me as though carried through a large pipe. A single voice rose above the rest as I tiptoed to the narrow space between the buildings. "You mutha, what in hell you think you doin' with that door?" the voice demanded in a tone of passionate hatred.

I leaned forward until I could see down the alley.

Thirty feet inside the narrow, brick-walled space, seven or eight menacing figures barred exit from the alley to Erikson and Candy who were silhouetted against the paint-faded side of a rickety-looking wooden structure once serving as weighing station and shipping foreman's office. To Erikson's left was a hip-level loading dock with a

splintered wooden bumper. Behind this was a sheet-metal-covered door, and I could just make out a tire iron still wedged in the door frame.

Underfoot in the alley were loose boards, broken cinder blocks, wooden soft-drink cases, bricks, broken bottles, and a single large packing crate angled out from one wall about ten feet from where I was standing.

The skirmish line confronting Erikson and Candy was obviously working itself up to attack. Shouts, curses, threats, and bitter racial epithets filled the air. The vocalists were black, dressed in ensembles featuring dirty Levi's, leather jackets, desert boots, ponchos, bellbottoms, and tennis shoes. I eased along the alley and stepped into the wedge-shaped space afforded by one wall and the back of the shoulder-high packing crate.

The shouters sounded young, and three or four to one odds against men like Erikson and Candy wouldn't have been too bad except that the taunting black barrier was armed. My new position disclosed a tall youth with a bristling Afro who served as chief medicine man in agitating the others. He had a section of 2x4 in one hand. Next to him, a stocky type carried a jack-handle. The semi-crouched stance of a skinny individual wearing a peak-visored cap suggested a knifeman although I couldn't see the knife. The largest of the group, a shaven-headed ox who must have weighed close to 300 pounds, held a rough-broken cinder block in one massive hand.

I had no time to inventory the rest. The medicine man whistled shrilly, and the skirmish line shuffled forward. Erikson picked his first target, and his left leg and right arm flashed forward in unison. The shaven-headed ox flew backward as though catapult-hurled. His bulk smashed into my packing case, pinning me to the wall. There was an explosion inside my lungs and sparklers blazed behind my eyes before I could focus them again.

I couldn't move. The limp body slumped against the crate pinned me to the rough-feeling bricks. A man screamed, and I saw Candy wiping the brickwork above his head with a figure extended upward in his hands.

Candy flung the figure down, a crawling, broken toy with a red smear for a face. Erikson hit two men who rebounded from the alley walls and from each other.

I shoved against the confining crate until my lower gut spasmed. I freed an arm finally and drew the automatic. Three men flowed over Erikson, and I didn't dare shoot. Candy destroyed a shrieking youth, then was slammed into Karl, and they both went down. They rose again, Candy immediately, Erikson slowly, like a bull whale emerging from the depths. Blood streamed from a gash over one eye.

A shout from behind me turned my head around. A black youth with a red headband was standing in the alley entrance. "Fall back, brothers!" he called loudly. "The bomber's here!"

The bedraggled skirmish line confronting Erikson and Candy disengaged at once and limped and hobbled to the alley entrance. One of them noticed me as I finally jerked myself clear of the packing crate. He swung a length of pipe angrily, striking my arm. A shock wave ran from my elbow clear down to my scrotum. I found myself on my knees without knowing how I got there.

Ten feet in front of the self-proclaimed bomber the skirmish line firmed up again. I was now trapped in the alley with Erikson and Candy. A wick-like orange flame arced over my head as the red-headbanded man's arm moved in a sweeping gesture toward Candy and Erikson. A flame-tipped bottle crashed through the remainder of an already broken window in the foreman's shed and fell inside, where the Molotov cocktail mushroomed into a huge flame licking at the dry wood. Tremendous heat began to fill the narrow area, and Candy, half-supporting Erikson, began to move away from the flaming shack.

The bomber's arm flashed forward again. From my knees I snapped off a shot at the burning-tongued bottle. Above the heads of the skirmish line the bottle disintegrated like a clay pigeon, and the gush of raw gasoline spewing from it was ignited by the wick-fuse before it hit the ground. A sheet of flame spread across the alley with a

loud whoosh, flowing like a fiery river across the shoes of the startled blacks.

Renewed yelps and shrieks filled the air as they stamped their burning shoes and slapped at their blazing trousers. They fled into the street past the bomber who had spotted me. He turned his back to me, but his semiconcealing body couldn't hide the glimmer of light that told he'd lit another fuse.

When he faced around, I put a 9mm Parabellum slug into his left knee. He collapsed on the sidewalk with the bottle under him. I heard the tinkling crash as it smashed on the cement. A pool of fire engulfed the black youth who was struggling to crawl away. By the time he flopped over twice he was a human torch, and his high screams filled the night.

No one knows better than I do what it feels like to be burned alive. I felt sorry for him, so I moved five yards closer and got in a head shot. The flopping and the screaming stopped. Behind me the alley was filled with dense, roiling smoke, intense heat, and live flames that made any picture I'd ever seen of Dante's Inferno look like a Boy Scout campfire. I knew Erikson, Candy, and I would be using the automatic on ourselves if we didn't make it to the street quickly.

Candy stumbled toward me, still half-supporting Karl, and I took his other arm. Together we steered him around the worst of the fire, then circumnavigated the mass of flame in the alley entrance which contained a charred lump in its center. Once clear of the alley, Candy left Erikson to me and went back into the devil's canyon. In seconds he reappeared, dragging by the armpits the shaven headed ox whose unconscious body had wedged the crate against me.

Candy propped the ox against a front wall of the warehouse, out of harm's way, and we half-walked, half-carried the almost exhausted Erikson to the rental car. Candy had a ballooning jawline and a puffy eye, plus a bloody-knuckled hand, but Erikson was in worse shape.

We got him into the car, and I looked him over. He had

second degree burns and singed hair on the back of his neck; a gash over his eye that could use a butterfly bandage; cut, bruised lips; and plenty of scrapes. He was holding his left leg above the knee. I removed his hand and looked at the blood soaking through his trousers. Beneath the slashed trouser-material a three-inch knife wound gaped open, not deep, but requiring stitches. Blood pulsed slowly.

Candy had already discarded the tatters of his jacket. He ripped up his handkerchief and used the strips to bind mine used as a pad over Erikson's knife wound. "We'll get him to a doctor," I said to Candy who was rubbing his swelling jaw.

"Get me—to office," Erikson said with difficulty. His usually resonant voice sounded reed-thin. "My doctor—make no police report. But first—got to take look—inside that warehouse." He hunched himself together as though he was going to try to leave the automobile.

I pushed him back against the seat. "Into that bonfire?"

"Washington insists—"

I held up my hand. "Listen!" In the distance we could hear the faint wail of sirens. "Police or firemen. Or both."

"No matter," Erikson said. "Black Knights breaking up—headquarters in that building. Washington wants checked out." His breath rasped as he tried to move his leg. "Tonight."

"Smarten up," I said. "Nobody can do anything now. The building will still be here unless the whole block goes up in flames. Candy and I will wait until things quiet down and then come back and check it out, okay?"

I walked around the car and got under the wheel before he could argue. The siren sound was urgent. I made two fast right-hand turns and negotiated the ramp to the Bay Bridge. With nothing to do but follow a suspended strip of concrete for eight miles, I simmered down slightly and began to think.

When I'd proposed to Erikson that Candy and I go back to the warehouse later, I hadn't really meant it. I only wanted to stop any argument so I could drive him

back to his office for patching up. The more I thought about it, though, the more it seemed like a good idea to make another move on the warehouse. Unless someone ordered a stakeout for possible looters after the fire, and the buildings seemed too abandoned for that.

The angle that concerned me most about Erikson's promotion of Hazel into taking the assignment at IDA was the Institute's possible connection to the Black Knights for Freedom. If I could get into the warehouse, I should be able to find out if a connection existed.

And if there was a connection, Erikson was going to have to find himself another pigeon.

By the time the rental car reached the San Francisco side of the bridge, I'd almost convinced myself I wanted to go back to the warehouse.

Almost.

CHAPTER VI

Ninety minutes later Candy and I were in the car again on our way back to Catlett Street. A doctor had appeared promptly at Erikson's office in response to a phone call, not a military doctor. After some stitching and patching, the doctor had injected a sedative via hypodermic needle into Karl's bicep when he wasn't expecting it. "No activity for at least twelve hours," the doctor ruled calmly in the face of Erikson's vehement but too-late protest.

Only after I promised that Candy and I would return at once to the scene of the recent imbroglio did Erikson settle down upon a cot in his office. He was particularly insistent that the inside of the warehouse be searched, repeating that he had been charged by Washington with this duty.

We made only one other stop before driving up the Fifth Street ramp onto the Bay Bridge again. I stopped at the Hotel Roosevelt where I changed wigs and altered my face a bit, using the makeup kit I always carried in the suitcase to minimize my facial surgery scars. I was able to offer Candy a partial change of clothing as well, so we presented a somewhat different appearance upon this second attempt.

The fog was beginning to disintegrate as we crossed the Bridge. A brisk on-shore breeze had disintegrated it into mere streamers of mist. Dawn wasn't too far distant now. Below us I could see the navigation lights of two heavily laden freighters wallowing in the cross-chop 300 feet

below as they made their way to the Golden Gate and the sea.

Our first run by the Pacific Fruit Company alleyway where the billowing petroleum-urged fire had raged a short time before showed blackened brick, melted windowpanes, and a still-smoking skeleton of studs where the framework of what had been the loading foreman's shed once stood. The alley looked larger now that the fire had reduced to lumps of ash the previous clutter of packing crates and other combustibles. There was no sign of anyone in the alley or on the sidewalk.

"You'd think there'd be a barricade or warning lights or something there," I remarked to Candy as we circled the block.

"Your coppers are smarter than that," he disagreed. "Anything like that is just advertising to the scavengers in the district. Not that there's much to scavenge, from the looks. I fancy the original group we tangled with has gone for a stroll, but just the same, I hope whatever you have in mind doesn't look like taking too much time."

"It shouldn't," I assured him. "Erikson would probably eyeball the interior with a microscope, but we'll just give it a fast onceover to get an idea of what was going on here, if anything. Karl's information was the place was being abandoned, anyway. I'm surprised you ran into the group you did."

"No more surprised than we were," Candy said. "We had been proceeding rather boldly."

We turned onto Catlett Street again and approached the alley entrance at a sedate ten miles an hour. "I can't remember meeting a more obstinate man than your friend Erikson," Candy said in a reflective tone. "If the doctor hadn't loaded him up with a knock-out sedative, he'd bloody well be limping along with us here now. He's misleading, you know. Except for his size, he hardly seems the type to turn into a human hurricane. But if he'd been ten percent less efficient during the scrap, our heads would probably be impaled on spikes in the center of the local ghetto. I feel I owe him a favor."

"Or if you had been ten percent less efficient," I put in, braking the car to a stop beyond the alley entrance.

He shrugged off the compliment. "These black brothers are different," he said. "They're all uptight with a cause. I was worked over by pros in Nassau, you'll remember, but that was the direct, unemotional approach. This was personal and vicious. If I'm ever recognized as the black who helped a white man, I'll be branded as an Oreo."

"Oreo?"

"Get with it, man. Oreo, like the cookies. Black on the outside, white on the inside."

I changed my mind about leaving the car on the street. There are times when the bold approach is best. I switched off the headlights before backing the car into the alleyway until its rear wheels thumped down upon the truck-weighing platform. At least its bulk would furnish a partial screen while we forced an entrance into the building, and I wanted it as close as possible for the getaway.

Candy and I eased out our respective sides of the car and met in front of the hip-high loading sill. The tire iron I'd seen wedged in the frame around the metal-sheathed door was gone. The police were probably checking it for fingerprint trace was made, the Navy, or the Veterans police no good. I knew he was a Reserve Navy officer with a complete personnel jacket, but I also knew that if a fingerprint trace was made, the Navy, or the Veterans Administration, or the FBI would deny that any such prints were on file.

I vaulted up onto the loading sill to check the door, and Candy floated up behind me. "It's open unless they've resecured it," he muttered in an undertone. "Erikson had already forced the latch. We were on our way inside when the fun began." He fitted his thick, muscular fingers into a recessed hand-slot in the door and inched it open. When the gap widened to a foot, I slipped through. Candy followed, then pulled the door closed behind us.

We waited until our eyes became accustomed to the dim interior light. Sea birds had sought shelter by coming in through the broken windows; guano spotted the chipped

and crumbling concrete floor. The spaciousness of the huge room interrupted only by pillars was relatively free of trash. I could see why the police had left no sentinels; there was nothing left to steal. Two empty freight elevators with fencelike gates across their cabs jutted out from the rear wall. Next to one was an iron stairway leading both up and down.

"I don't believe there's a soul inside the place," Candy breathed from beside me.

I hoped he was right, but I still drew the automatic into which I had slipped a full magazine while we were at Fort Mason. Closer inspection of the elevators showed that the cables were gone and the motors had been removed. Where ceiling lights used to be, only bare sockets remained. Some of the connecting conduit had been removed, also.

I pointed to the stairway. "I'll go up, you go down," I whispered. "Whoever finds nothing goes back to the loading dock and serves as lookout." Candy nodded. He started down the stairs while I went up the iron treads on tiptoe, keeping tightly to the wall. The second-floor level was a twin of the first and promised nothing interesting. The darkness didn't seem as intense, and I noticed that the fog had lifted sufficiently so that moonlight was coming in the windows on the Catlett Street side of the building.

The third floor was almost identical to the ones below except for a partitioned-off area along the back wall which made a room about 12x40 feet. A door in its center stood ajar, and a single glance inside confirmed that the lead Erikson's boss in Washington had given him was a correct one.

There had been an evacuation, all right, but an orderly one. The yawning drawers of the office's three desks and four metal file cabinets were empty, as were the twin shelves of a glass-fronted bookcase. The contents of the desks and file cabinets was now presumably a mass of burnt paper in the four large metal wastebaskets lined up in the center of the room. They had been pressed into service as emergency incinerators.

The office furniture, including two dozen metal chairs stacked against a wall, wasn't new but it was in good condition. Someone had spent money to outfit the setup. A large blackboard mounted in an oak-wood easel frame was cocked sideways in one corner. The room had obviously been used both as a meeting place and an instruction classroom.

Printed across the entire blackboard space in broad letters made by the flat side of a three-inch piece of chalk was the word DRUMFIRE! The original exclamation point had been crossed out and replaced by a crude drawing of a raised, clenched fist. Graffiti marred the office walls, the most prominent being "D-Day Is Coming!" splashed in red paint between two windows. A gun rack, identical to those found in National Guard armories, designed to hold twenty-four M-3 rifles, was anchored to one wall. Fresh drops of oil at its base indicated that the guns had been removed very recently.

The side windows were covered by heavy draperies. Temporary but neatly installed wiring led to fluorescent light fixtures overhead. The power source came through a knocked-out brick in the side wall to furnish unlimited free electricity. I went to a window and pulled a drapery aside. The hideout had been carefully chosen to provide an escape route through the window and over the roofs of adjacent buildings. Some members of this clandestine cell had had useful technical training. The blackout curtains, the rifle rack, and the security precautions suggested a paramilitary operation.

I went back to the metal wastebaskets and dumped their contents out onto the floor. Three of them spewed out nothing but flaky gray ashes, but the fourth delivered up a few half-charred paper segments from its bottom. The only salvagable item was a portion of a burned manila file folder. Across the remnant were the first letters of two words printed in block letters with a broad-tipped felt pen. The top word started with the letters PL and then crumpled into an ash-deckled edge. Below this were three letters of another word that began DRU.

I opened the file folder carefully. Inside were other nearly consumed papers. I found burned tatters of oil company road maps of San Francisco, Marin, and Contra Costa counties, as well as a fourth segment which at first glance I took to be another road map but turned out to be a hydrographic chart with its identifying heading either cut or burned away.

The most legible items in the folder were half a dozen newspaper clippings which had escaped almost unharmed. At a quick glance, each had some reference or comment about the upcoming planned meeting of the Vice-Presidents of the United States and Mexico. It looked as though these black agitators were planning a demonstration to coincide with that meeting.

I sifted the dumped ashes with my toe but uncovered nothing more of interest. I carefully tucked the remnant of the file folder in my inside jacket pocket and started back down the iron stairway, the automatic still in my hand. I had never been able to understand why a man of Karl Erikson's abilities had been assigned as liaison with the local police forces in setting up security procedures for the meeting of the two Vice-Presidents, but the folder gave an indication why. Evidently someone in Washington had a pipeline into the Black Knights to some extent, and that someone expected trouble that decreed extra precautions.

The fact that there was money and planning ability behind the vacated black group made the precautions seem desirable.

Money, brains, and military weapons—as indicated by the empty gun rack—were never an easy combination to combat.

Candy was a dark bulk beside the loading platform door. He stirred as I approached him. "This waitin' in the dark gets me," he proclaimed in a muttered whisper. "Can we get the hell out've here now? Nothin's stirrin' outside."

I replaced the automatic in its belt holster, then waited while Candy eased the door open. We leaped down onto the still fog-wet alley concrete and proceeded to the car. I

had driven three blocks before Candy thought to speak to the point of our mission. "Find anything worth while?" he asked.

"Erikson may think so," I returned, and we rode the remainder of the distance to Erikson's office in silence. Candy was wide-eyed as we negotiated the steel doors and I used the key Erikson had given me to enter his office. A buzzer sounded which ordinarily would have waked him, but he was still asleep on the cot.

I felt no compunction about waking him since I was sure I had discovered at least part of what his original retrieval mission had been about. A half dozen shakes had him sitting up dazedly on the edge of the cot. Once on his feet he sharpened up considerably although he was plainly in considerable pain. He moved gingerly to a corner sink, favoring his slashed leg, and sluiced his face, careful of his scrapes and bruises.

He held out his hand finally for the folder I held before him. He scanned it rapidly, and as I expected, lingered longest over the newspaper clippings. He was frowning when he set the charred remnant down upon a corner of his desk. "I don't understand this," he said, then shrugged. "Thanks," he continued abruptly. "You'll have to leave the office now. I'm going to call Washington."

"One thing," I said, and he raised an eyebrow. "Hazel is definitely not moving into this IDA setup."

"What possible danger can there be to her inside the complex?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I don't want to know. She's out."

"Have you forgotten that cover has been provided for you to accompany her?"

"I don't give a damn. She's out." I pointed at the folder-remnant on his desk. "You're a good reason why. Those people play too rough."

"It's yet to be proven they have any but the most tenuous connection with IDA," he pointed out.

"It's yet to be disproved that the connection isn't a live wire," I retorted. "Forget it."

Candy and I went out to the car. "He's a hard man to argue with, ain't he?" Candy said admiringly. "He just a hard man all around."

We exchanged only one other comment during the drive back to the borrowed apartment in Chinatown. "What's next for you?" I asked the gambler. "After this visit, I mean?"

He spread his large black hands in a fatalistic gesture. "The island, I guess. Nassau. Although I don't really know why. There's nothing there for me now." His tone was brooding. "It's been quite a few years since I felt so useless."

He didn't continue, and I didn't press it. He was so far removed from the exuberant gambler I'd first met on the hijacked gambling flight to Las Vegas that he didn't seem like the same man.

I'd expected Hazel and Chen Yi to be asleep, but they were in the kitchenette drinking jasmine tea when Candy's key admitted us. "Guess what," Hazel greeted me after a warm welcoming kiss. "Karl just called and said we're all set to start at IDA in the next day or so."

"How do you like that weasel?" I demanded rhetorically. "I just left him after telling him you weren't going to do it."

"But why not?"

"Never mind the details. We're going back to the ranch."

Hazel frowned. "I've already told Karl I'd do it, Earl."

"Things have changed, sugarfoot. It's a losing bet now."

"Why is it a losing bet?" Hazel asked stubbornly.

I could see Chen Yi examining the bruises on Candy's face. "Do I smell smoke on your clothes?" the tall Chinese girl asked Candy. "And what happened to your jacket?"

I tried to focus on convincing Hazel while watching Candy brush off Chen Yi's questions. "It's a losing bet because Karl is riding a bad horse. He doesn't even know what he's into."

"Then he needs help," she countered.

"Not from you."

"Let's sleep on it. What's this about smoke on your clothes?"

"You wouldn't believe the garbage they're putting into cigars these days."

She stared at me, but she let it go at that. We said our goodnights to Chen Yi and Candy, thanked them for the dinner, and went out to the street. We were back at the Roosevelt in ten minutes. It wasn't quite full daylight when I parked near the Jones Street entrance. The garage was closed from midnight to seven A.M., so I'd have to park on the street until the garage opened. The night man unlocked the door for us. In that Tenderloin area, the lobby doors were also locked at midnight and no one got in who wasn't recognized or could show a key.

"What about that smoke?" Hazel demanded when we were in our room.

"Let's sleep on it," I needled her, knowing her curiosity. She sniffed at the reversal of the gambit with which she had put me off, and we went to bed with cold shoulder the order of the morning.

It seemed to me I had hardly closed my eyes when the ringing of the telephone woke me. Hazel crawled over me and plucked the receiver from its old-fashioned box on the wall, pinning me with her weight. "Yes?" she said.

There followed a series of "Yesses" and "I'll be delighteds" and 'Thank you, Mr. Reynolds" before she hung up the phone with a satisfied smile.

"Who's Mr. Reynolds?" I yawned.

"The personnel director at IDA," she replied, beaming. "He welcomed me to the facility and said I could make use of their technical proficiencies as long as I wished, and he hoped I'd have luck with my project. Wasn't that nice of him?"

"Lovely," I grunted. She pouted at my lack of enthusiasm, and went into the bathroom. The second the door closed behind her I reached for the telephone and called Erikson's number. "You're springing informational leaks

in your ship, man," I told him when I had him on the line. "How would the personnel director at IDA know enough to call Hazel at this number?"

There was a short silence. "The only way I can think of is that Washington may have furnished it to IDA to add authenticity to the package of *bona fides* they supplied for Hazel and you," he answered.

I had shaken off enough of the sleep-fuzziness to have my brain in gear. "Did you use her square name with Washington?" I demanded. "Hazel Andrews?"

"Yes. She'll be required to furnish personal identification when she first checks in at IDA."

"Tell me something, then. We're checked in here at the Roosevelt as Mr. and Mrs. Earl Drake. How could this Reynolds call Hazel Andrews?"

There was another silence. The bathroom door opened and Hazel emerged. "Perhaps Washington included the phone number and Reynolds didn't ask for the name."

"We're in a hotel, you idiot! He had to ask for a room number to get us! If he'd asked for her by name, he'd have drawn a blank!"

"What difference does it make, really, Earl?"

"The difference it makes is that someone is too damn nosy, understand?"

"I imagine personnel directors have encountered situations before where a liaison resulted in a different name being used in a hotel. Why don't you stop looking under the bed? And let me talk to Hazel?"

"Say goodbye," I told him. "We're going back to the ranch."

"Let me talk to Hazel," he repeated.

I handed her the phone. I knew we weren't going back to the ranch. I've been around the redhead long enough to know what happens when she gets the bit in her teeth. "Fine," she kept saying on the phone to whatever Erikson was telling her. "Fine."

"Fine!" I snorted when she hung up the phone. "Why do you go for this snow job Erikson's giving you?"

She smiled at me. "Because he thinks it's important and he thinks I can help. He said I should become familiar with the contents of the package you picked up at his office last night. Where is it?"

"In the hotel safe." I rose from the bed resignedly. "We'll pick it up after breakfast."

"Lunch," Hazel corrected me after a glance at her watch.

We dressed and went downstairs. After a quick meal at the Chinese restaurant in the Hotel Governor we brought the sealed package back up to the room with us. For a couple of hours we went over it all. About two-thirds of it was fourteen miles over my head, but the essentials were much as Erikson had said when he first proposed that Hazel infiltrate the IDA complex. What we had in our hands was a preliminary report with many of the working papers of an actual technical study, once highly classified but now abandoned. Each page had TOP SECRET printed at head and foot. Every document cover was headed up Strategic Concepts Evaluation Group. It would make a very impressive appearance spread out on a desk.

We were still going over the material when Chen Yi called. I answered the phone. "Why don't you two come on over to the apartment for dinner tonight?" she asked.

"We played that record," I said. "Tonight you two are going out to dinner with us."

"I have a refrigerator full of food that will go to waste," she said. "Candy is talking about leaving for Nassau." She waited for a moment, but I didn't say anything. "Please come," she said. "He's more cheerful when you're here."

"Okay," I said finally. "We'll bring the wine."

"Thanks for understanding," she said in her soft voice.

She was a mighty understanding type herself, the way she managed the mercurial Candy.

Chen Yi's second dinner party turned out to have few party aspects. Candy had obviously been at the Metaxa before our arrival, and he was red-eyed and sullen. Chen

Yi's efforts to talk for two were interrupted by her trips to the kitchen to check on her deliciously aromatic cooking.

I had a word with Chen Yi alone when Hazel was busy setting the table. "D'you think going back to Nassau is a good idea with Candy in his present mood?" I asked her.

"Nothing is a good idea in his present mood," she answered soberly. "And I don't know what to do. I've never seen him like this. He can speak of nothing except the past year's losing streak. He's beginning to think he is cursed. Bahamians are not too far removed from voodoo practice, you know. And with nothing to do when he goes back—" She shrugged as though the answer was beyond her.

Hazel rejoined us and I let it drop. She and Chen Yi took turns stirring the simmering pots on the stove. I sat with Candy who nursed a brandy pony between his huge palms and stared at the wall.

The evening hadn't begun auspiciously, anyway. We had walked from the hotel to the apartment, since Hazel loved to window shop the exotic imported merchandise in the Grant Street stores. When we turned onto California Street, I noticed two blacks loitering across the street from Chen Yi's borrowed apartment. Blacks aren't all that common in Chinatown, and these two silent figures who commanded a view of the apartment door disturbed me. I took Hazel's arm and marched her by the apartment, up the hill. We turned right on Stockton and circled the block before approaching the apartment again. The blacks were gone, and we went in. "What was that all about?" Hazel asked while we waited for the door to be opened.

"Just double-checking," I put her off.

"How do you figure that outfit on Catlett Street?" I said to Candy now to break the silence in the living room.

"Bad paper," he said after a reflective moment. His red-rimmed eyes seemed inward-turned as he considered the question further. "Kamikazes. Real badass types. Mad at the world." His eyes shifted to me. "Why d'you want to get involved?"

"I owe Erikson a favor," I explained lamely.

It was an explanation that didn't satisfy even me. After the previous night's witch hunt, I was in the mood to call the whole thing off, yet Hazel and I were now poised on the brink of still deeper involvement.

"Does he pay you?" Candy asked.

"Not very much," I said even more lamely.

The conversation lapsed. Candy could understand a mercenary, I thought to myself, but he has difficulty in understanding a fool. Then the secondary aspect of his question hit me. Was Candy inquiring if he was to be paid for his participation in the affair? I'd have to talk to Erikson before I could give any kind of an answer if Candy put the question more directly. Certainly Erikson would never have made it out of the alley the night before if Candy hadn't taken vigorous, effective action.

Dinner featured duck mandarin-style, and it was delicious, but unfortunately the meal was a subdued one. I could see Hazel studying the morose-looking Candy, and Chen Yi devoted the bulk of her attention to him, too. I got the feeling she was apprehensive of fireworks of some sort. And I sympathized with her walking-on-eggs attitude. From what I'd seen of him before, Candy wasn't the passive sort of character that permitted Lady Luck to trample upon him without rebuttal.

Chen Yi was in the kitchen again after serving the main course when there was a knock at the apartment door. Candy roused himself from his reverie and rose to his feet. "I'll get it," he said. I could see out into the hallway when he opened the door. Two black men were standing there, and I was positive they were the same two I had seen across the street before Hazel and I entered the apartment.

"Jus' checkin' you out, brother," one of the two blacks said to Candy. Although the gambler was far from being a midget, both men dwarfed him. "Jus' checkin' to see you didn' fly straight to the arms of whitey."

Chen Yi appeared from the kitchenette and walked to the hall doorway. "What is it?" she wanted to know.

The appearance of the tall Chinese girl appeared to sur-

prise the blacks. They were unable to see Hazel and me seated at the table. "See you later, brother," the second black said, and they turned awy from the door.

Candy closed it and he and Chen Yi came back inside. "Who are those two men?" Chen Yi asked sharply.

"Couple guys I met over in the East Bay today when I was mousin' around," Candy muttered. He looked and sounded sheepish.

"And they followed you here? What were you doing with them, Candy?"

"Talkin'," he said sullenly.

"Talking about what?"

"Business."

"Business! What possible business—"

"I don't want to talk about it, woman!" Candy roared at her suddenly, and Chen Yi subsided. Candy strode to the brandy bottle and refilled his glass before again taking his seat at the table. He was muttering unintelligibly to himself.

I was almost as upset as Chen Yi. Candy mousing around in the East Bay? On his own? And then letting himself be followed right back to the borrowed apartment.

The party aspects of our dinner having just about evaporated, Hazel and I left as soon as we decently could.

I felt guilty about leaving Chen Yi with the silent, brandy-drinking Candy, having witnessed his volatile reaction with her once before, but she had made that decision herself long before I'd ever met her.

I made sure I reached the street first where I took a quick look around before permitting Hazel to exit. There was no sign of Candy's callers. We didn't walk back to the Roosevelt, either. I whistled down a cab, and we settled back into it. "Why was Chen Yi so upset with Candy about those two men?" Hazel asked me. "If he'd just been talking business with them?"

"Maybe because she knows he hasn't any business to talk about these days," I answered her.

But I could understand Candy's desperation.

He couldn't stand being batted out.

He still had the remains of the expense money I'd given him the night before, and he could go over to the East Catlett Street bars and talk. Harmlessly, except that nothing in that area was harmless.

Candy was hardly a sheep among wolves, but in that particular neighborhood he almost qualified.

CHAPTER VII

My first look at the Institute for Defense Analysis on the Berkeley campus was disappointing. I had expected elaborate security measures, but there wasn't even a protective chain link fence. Flowering shrubs and evergreens surrounded the building.

Hazel and I approached it from an adjacent parking lot. We walked up three broad marble steps to a pair of inch-thick glass doors that were aluminum-framed set in a facade of polished black marble. The outer foyer's limits ended ten feet inside where an immense wall of glass contained another double set of glass doors.

Through them a huge and brilliantly colored mosaic mural on the far wall made a dramatic initial impact. It depicted the development of calculating devices from the abacus to the modern electronic computer. Beyond the transparent wall was a low, wrought-iron balustrade across the lobby that served as an intermediate barrier. A gap in the center funneled traffic past an elderly, white-haired man in the uniform of the Berkeley campus police. This mild-looking guardian was seated behind a desk that served as a checkpoint.

Hazel stepped up to the desk and showed the gate guard the plastic badge identifying her as a Defense Department employee as if she'd done it every day of her adult life. The guard glanced at the color photo of Hazel that Erikson had taken with a Polaroid earlier that morning when he had given us our last minute instructions.

The guard waved her through, his eyes lingering on Hazel's hip movement under her prim-looking midiskirt. The old gentleman was a connoisseur. He didn't give me or my badge a second look as I followed Hazel. Under Erikson's guidance, Hazel had subdued her normal healthy, out-of-door coloration by using pale makeup to duplicate the Pentagon pallor common to government workers who spend most daylight hours indoors, but to my way of thinking it was wasted effort. The basic Hazel still came through strongly.

When we were inside the gate, the guard called an extension number from his desk phone. A young woman who actually looked like the drab Washington import Hazel was supposed to be bustled into the lobby from a nearby office. "I'm Myrtle Bancroft, Mr. Reynolds' secretary," she announced. "He's tied up at the moment, so he asked me to look after you. If you'll come this way, please."

I glanced into the offices we passed in the wake of the personnel director's secretary. There seemed to be no rule about keeping doors closed. What I saw reminded me of clerical offices in a large insurance firm. The files seemed to take up more space than anything else. Erikson hadn't been kidding when he told us IDA's greatest export was waste paper while its largest purchase was stationery. I noticed that electronic alarm tapes framed every window.

"Mr. Reynolds extends a cordial welcome to you, Mrs. Andrews, and to you, too, Mr. Drake," Myrtle Bancroft assured us. She paused in front of an office next to a stairway leading downward. She entered the office and made a quick visual survey, then went to one of the two desks in the room and handed Hazel two keys on a metal ring. "One locks the office door, the other is for the outside building door, in case you want to spend any time here at night," she said.

"I suppose there's a guard?" I asked.

"A night watchman. There's a night bell at the left of the second entrance. The watchman will open up for any

authorized person on the staff." She gave us a fleeting smile. "Which includes you both now."

"Should we lock up here every time we leave the office?" Hazel inquired.

"It's not necessary," Reynolds' secretary said. "Everyone in the building is cleared to the same degree. No one is really excluded from what's going on. We have a close association here."

I wondered if Erikson knew it. Some of what he'd had to say hardly pointed in that direction. Hazel was checking desk drawers and closets. She even examined one of the kraft-paper shopping bags with the words "Burn-Classified Waste-Burn" printed on front and back that were stuffed open-mouthed into the wastebaskets.

Myrtle Bancroft departed after Hazel expressed her thanks, and I began going over the room for anything that looked like an eavesdropping device. It was a sterile-looking office, but it didn't pay to take chances. Hazel closed the door while I really dug into things. I examined the two executive desks and a worktable, several four-drawer steel files with a combination lock in the top drawer of each, the steel-lined storage closets, the light fixtures, and the airconditioning unit. Each desk had a side extension. One held an electric typewriter, the other a table-top computer.

I had just picked up the telephone on the first desk to unscrew the mouthpiece to look for an implanted microphone when I heard the doorknob turn. I quickly replaced the instrument as a big man entered, holding a key he hadn't needed in his hand. "I'm Sidney Reynolds," he addressed himself to Hazel. "Welcome."

He was tall and dark with at least thirty extra pounds of fat on his frame. His black hair was thinning on top and his full sideburns were fringed with white. He looked about fifty. Something in his manner made me picture him in a sultan's costume examining Hazel as an overfed potentate would examine a new member of his harem.

Not that he wasn't polite. He apologized for entering without knocking, pleading ignorance of our quick install-

ment. He observed protocol, ignoring me while buttering Hazel up one side and down the other. He assured her of his complete cooperation. Sidney Reynolds may have sworn allegiance to the government, but at the moment I had the distinct impression that he wasn't concerned with what he could do for his country, but what he could do for himself.

When Hazel introduced us, the hand Sidney Reynolds laid in mine resembled a freshly caught squid. Reynolds made it clear by that single languid handshake that government chattels in my category were far removed from Hazel's supposed stature. "My dear," he said to her grandly, "I'd like to take you on a tour of the facility so you can meet some of the staff."

And he whisked her away.

Erikson had prepared me somewhat—if not fully—for the style of Reynolds' approach. "You'll create an impact there," he told Hazel. "It's a cloistered operation, and they know each other's dirty jokes and—ah—physical configurations. New blood is welcomed. The male of the species will be only too anxious to make contact and—ah—conquest."

I closed the door again and locked it this time, then went to work on scrubbing down the office for electronic snares. When I was satisfied the room was clean, I completed the check by calling Erikson's office with an innocuous message, then held the phone silently for three minutes while Erikson's people in the Fort Mason blockhouse did whatever they did with electronic snoopers to check for wire taps.

The process was almost inaudible. Twice during the test I heard a faint, high-frequency squeal, and that was all. Erikson came back on the line to give me the okay, and I unlocked the door, sat down at the smaller desk, and waited.

When Hazel returned, she had company. She opened the door, and beyond her in the corridor I could see three men, all young, vying to be helpful. They hadn't lost any time moving in on the new female, and one look was

enough to assure me that Hazel had landed an important fish in her perfumed net. The tallest of the three men was slim, sandy haired, and dapper. He wore a kelly-green, six-button, double-breasted jacket with wide, pointed lapels, snug at the waist, but flared at the skirt. His long legs were adorned in yellow-and-green plaid bellbottomed slacks, that fit closely around the thighs but were extra wide at the cuffs. He wore a turtleneck sweater, and his heavy-rimmed glasses accentuated his intense-looking eyes.

Hazel had accomplished in thirty minutes what we'd failed to do in several days at Golden Gate Fields. I didn't need an introduction to know I was gazing upon the sometime betting companion of the black professor, Emory Williams. Things were looking up.

Hazel dismissed her entourage graciously, rolling her eyes at me comically when her back was to them. She closed the door, then leaned against its inner side, fanning herself. "Whew! The wolf pack really turns it on in this establishment!"

"How'd you find him so quickly, Hazel?"

"Would you believe he found me? We went to the lounge for coffee, and I looked up and there he was. With friends. Virgil Peterson. Dr. Virgil Peterson, Ph.D.-type doctor. Earl, you'll never believe this place! There must be nearly two hundred people in the building, and I'm scared."

"Why?"

"They're friendly, and talkative. Someone's bound to trip me up."

"Crawl under the desk and hide. Seriously, who have they got to talk to but each other? Erikson says they can't discuss their work outside, even with family or friends. They're required to associate with each other so if there's a security breach through a slip of the tongue, it's all in the working family. We'll just have to keep to ourselves as much as possible without seeming too unfriendly. Any problem moving around the building?"

"No. This office area goes clear across the front, and

another behind with a courtyard in between. Both are joined at the west end by the library which closes the 'U'. Downstairs are the document storage and computer areas, no more restricted than the offices."

"Is anything restricted around here?"

"The library," Hazel said promptly. "But wait till you see those computers . . . banks and banks of them, running at top speed. It's the only place I saw that really seemed busy. That's where Virgil Peterson works as a systems analyst, whatever that is."

"You'd better call Karl and find out what he thinks we should do next, don't you think?"

"It's already decided," she told me with an impish grin. "I'm having lunch with Virgil. We're on a first-name basis around here."

"I can see why Erikson wanted you here," I admitted. "You'll draw more flies than a maple tree in sap-time."

But at lunchtime I moved out to give Hazel a clear track. I drove down the hill and got a quick bite at a drugstore lunch counter, then went back to the office and waited for Hazel. It was 2:00 P.M. before she showed up. She slumped down in her swivel chair and surveyed me with a satisfied look. "We've struck pay dirt with Virgil, Earl," she began. "He's a real brain, although it's slightly out of joint. The type with a hell of an I.Q. but not too much common sense. Went through school like a dose of salts, but a noisy radical all the way. He says he stayed in school only to avoid the draft, then grabbed off this defense-oriented job at IDA. He's a time-bomb here, but he also said he's purposely staying low-key."

"Why?"

"I asked, but he just smiled."

"Did he invite you up to see his etchings?"

"Oh, sure, and he kept rubbing his leg against mine all during lunch. He kept giving me this jive about the real woman underneath my all-business exterior. But then I said the magic word, and we were off and running."

"Horse racing?"

"Correct. When he saw I knew what I was talking about,

he opened up wide. Even hinted at a computer-betting operation going on right here within IDA. He's going to the track tomorrow to catch the last three races, so I'll milk my racetrack pals for a couple of high-probability winners and have Virgil bet them for me. If they run at all, he'll show up with some respect for me."

"No sign of the black professor, Williams?"

"None. I did have a twenty-minute talk with Sidney Reynolds just now. It should only have taken ten, but he dragged it out. I got him to agree to let Virgil be our prime contact with the systems analysts people. You know Karl said we'd need one. I came away with the impression that Reynolds isn't averse to playing footsie with a transient female, the type who's available for a temporary fling while she's here and then vanishes without trailing any loose ends behind."

"Your wisdom astounds me, doll."

As her first official act of business, Hazel made a spitball and threw it at me.

We slipped into the routine at IDA more easily than I would have believed possible. The big thing we had going for us was Hazel's private office. I hid out most of the time there so no one could question me about my supposed computer-coding background.

Not that we lacked company. Hazel continued to draw men like honey bees to an apple orchard. In particular, Virgil Peterson hung around. After he'd placed a couple of bets for her which came home winners at good odds, there was more horse-talk during our coffee breaks than shop-talk. Hazel had put a dimmer on classified discussion from the outset, anyway, by smilingly quoting Pentagon security regulations on Strategic Concepts Evaluation Group projects.

Another regular visitor to the office was Sidney Reynolds. Since he was an administrator and not a technician, he really didn't fit in the group which sometimes saw seven or eight folding chairs drawn up around Hazel's desk at coffee-break time. Mostly Reynolds sat and listened.

Except when Reynolds was present, young Peterson kept the conversational ball rolling. He was an engaging kid despite his weird clothes and offbeat viewpoint. The fourth horse Hazel gave him to play paid $24.80, and when he paid her off in front of the coffee-break gang the next day, Virgil dropped to one knee and with mock-solemnity proposed marriage to her. Hazel counter-proposed a long engagement, and Virgil presented her with an engagement ring made from computer-wire.

But he was a sharp kid, too, and not only at his work. Even before the mock engagement, he cornered me one day when Hazel was out of the office. "She digs you, right?" he said to me.

"Right on," I agreed, seizing the chance to get it on the record and spread it through the complex.

"You're a lucky bastard, Drake."

"Right on," I said again.

I told Hazel about it later, and she smiled. "One more winner and he'll think I'm the greatest filly since Regret. Did you know he once worked for the National Security Agency at Fort Meade near the Laurel, Maryland, race-track? That's where he began playing the horses. He said the cryptographers and top computer analysts there had a computer-betting program in full swing."

"Like they're supposed to have here? How does it work?"

"Let me see if I can remember what he told me." Hazel closed her eyes. "Its not a matter of feeding all information on a single race into a computer. It's much more complicated. In order to utilize a computer to determine the highest degree of probability for one set of conditions, the memory bank must first be crammed with pertinent data extracted and stored over a long period of experience which can be measured against a variety of conditions. Tape banks would contain all previous performances of both horse and jockey and their probable chances for winning compared to all other combinations of horse and jockey in the current environment in which the race is run, including temperature, wind velocity, turf moisture con-

tent, and twenty other factors. They have agronomists testing racetrack soil conditions and meteorologists checking wind conditions daily. There is a lot of comparative analysis necessary at a speed of something called nanoseconds before a validity of a selected peak probability can be established."

Hazel drew a long breath. "Understand?"

"No. I'll stick to the Racing Form. I suppose all the NSA horseplayers at Laurel own sport cars and big yachts?"

Hazel shook her head. "They were finally caught using a government computer for such frivolity, although any horseplayer could have told you there was nothing frivolous about it. Some were fired and some were transferred, and that was the end of the—" Her eyes narrowed suddenly. "Say!" She tapped a finger on the desk. "Maybe it's time to lean on Virgil a bit to speed this up."

When he came into the office, she started in on him right away. "How's the computer-betting operation going, Virgil?"

He glanced at me. "I told you it was broken up by the NSA security people at Fort Meade," he said innocently.

"I mean the one operating right here," she informed him.

He threw in the sponge. "It's not coming up with any $24.80 winners. What do you know that we don't?"

"Oh, I get a tip from a trainer once in a while," Hazel said airily. "That his feed bill's due and he's trying a little harder. Or he thinks the favorite's a bit gimpy and he has a chance at a price. Little things."

"It's the little things that produce winners," Virgil agreed. "Would you talk to our programmer sometime? About trainers' tendencies to try or to coast? That sort of thing?"

"I'd probably jam up the operation," Hazel objected.

"Not from what I've seen," Virgil declared. "If we could get a winner at a price like the last one you had we could shut down this operation."

"Shut it down?" I asked curiously.

"Well, we could retire rich," Peterson said lamely. He appeared confused. "I'll bring our programmer around, Hazel."

"So there's the explanation for the thousand and twelve hundred dollar bets," Hazel said when we were driving across the bridge to San Francisco and the Hotel Roosevelt that afternoon. "A few of them have pooled their cash and they're sending it in. Did you get the feeling from what Virgil said that the betting group has set a certain amount as a goal for themselves?" She turned her head from an introspective viewing of the sun setting beyond the Golden Gate Bridge. "When you tell Karl about this, be sure to mention that none of the people we've met at IDA could have had anything to do with the Aqueduct affair. They're not the type."

"Let's leave that evaluation to Karl."

At the Roosevelt, we delayed going out to dinner while we engaged in a little bed exercise. When Hazel gets in a really sexy mood, she carries me along with her like the second-place car drafting the leader in the Daytona 500. We rattled the bedsprings and shook all the loose dust from the underside of the mattress cover. It was a beautifully turbulent interval.

"Not bad, sugarfoot," I said afterward.

She rubbed herself against me from her female-superior position. "I'll make my own evaluation of that," she said.

I whacked her tail, and we dressed and went out to dinner.

I never met the programmer who did the data preparation prior to storing up horse race information in the computer, but Hazel did. In the best IDA tradition, Virgil was keeping his projects compartmentalized. He was really a funny kid. Sitting in Hazel's office when she was out, talking to me, he came through as an anti-establishment type, although soft-pedaled. "This crime studies team I'm on here," he said to me one morning, "is the most interesting job I've had since I've been with IDA."

"Yes? What are you doing?"

"Right now we're devising new methods of committing crimes in order to develop new techniques to combat them."

"I can see how it would be educational. How'd you get assigned to it?"

"I worked with a Pentagon war games team as liaison between them and an NSA backup group. I guess someone figured my department-of-dirty-tricks background qualified me for this job."

"You say Pentagon like it was a dirty word, Virgil. Are you a peacenik?"

"That's the dirty word around here," he said cautiously.

"Scrub it if I hit a nerve."

"Oh, hell, I guess it's no secret how I feel about the administration's military policy." He said it defiantly. "It's for the birds."

"Speaking of birds," I seized the chance to lead him on to something else, "did your group study the security problems related to the transfer of large sums of money by helicopter? Like from bank to bank?"

"Yes," he said after a pause during which he plainly changed his mind a couple of times about his reply. "Why?"

"I've been thinking if a guy could get a little cash together, it wouldn't make a bad business investment."

Hazel walked into the office just then, and I expected Peterson to stop talking, but he didn't. "That's not what I thought you were going to say, Drake. As a horseplayer, I thought you were leading up to a comment on the attempted helicopter hijack at Aqueduct. I should think you would have heard of it."

"What's this about Aqueduct?" Hazel asked in pretended innocence.

"There was a remarkable parallel between a study done here on helicopter transfer of money and what took place at Aqueduct," Virgil said. "Almost too much of a parallel to be accidental."

"I should think you'd be afraid to admit that to a couple of comparative strangers," Hazel said in a joking tone.

"Not when I've got more on the strangers than they have on me," Virgil said coolly.

Hazel never turned a hair. "Like?" she said.

"Like you're not a government researcher. When I was with NSA at Fort Meade, I had a good friend in the Pentagon assigned to the exact project you claim to be working on for the Strategic Concepts Evaluation Group. I know the project was shelved, permanently. So I have to think," he ticked off his fingers, "that you two are inside IDA under false pretenses, that you're inside a top secret installation with nary a clearance in the world, and if it weren't for the obviously authentic project material you have in hand, I'd suspect you of being foreign agents or traitors."

Virgil Peterson grinned engagingly after dropping his little bombshell. "But no foreign agent could pick horses like you can, Hazel. I like you, redhead, and since he goes with you—" he flicked a thumb at me "mum's the word." His grin widened. "Up the organization, right?" He paused for effect. "As long as you slip me a few winners, too." He paused again. "Privately."

"Beautiful," I said sourly when Peterson left the office. "A two zillion to one shot and we catch it dead center. What d'you think Erikson is going to say to that row of potatoes?"

"I think you'd better call him and find out," she said soberly.

"Exactly what is Peterson's job here? Erikson will want to know that, too."

"His group studies patterns of violent crime. Geographical locations, age groups, social milieus, times of year, political climate—the whole bit."

I called Erikson. "I don't see that you've lost any ground particularly," he said after I filled him in.

"Then sharpen up your ears!" I exclaimed. "This kid as much as threatened to expose us!"

"Plainly he's establishing a *quid pro quo*," Erikson said. "You know he's involved in something illegal with this

computer-betting affair, so he's made it clear if you talk about him he'll talk about you."

"If I ever heard a short-sighted, self-serving rationale—"

"Anything else out of the ordinary?" Erikson cut me off.

"Yes. Someone's been looking over the coded punch-cards Hazel gives me to play with here. Whenever I leave the office, I always arrange them in the same order. Twice when I've come back they've been in a different pattern."

"No problem," Erikson said. "If anyone goes the whole route and runs off a print-out from those cards, you two are going to look like geniuses. It's not Peterson who's doing it; he doesn't need to run any cards. Find out who it is and you'll be doing something."

There was a certain rough logic in what the man said.

"Let's get together for dinner tonight at the Little Sweden on O'Farrell Street and kick this thing around a bit more," Karl continued. "About seven o'clock."

I was left with the telephone line humming emptily in my ear.

Little Sweden was within a short distance of the Roosevelt. Hazel and I walked two blocks up the hill on Jones Street in a fog so heavy it was almost a fine mist, turned west on O'Farrell, and the blue-and-yellow sign of the restaurant was visible in the first block.

We descended a flight of stairs and entered below street level. Erikson waved from a corner table, and we joined him. "You're looking fine," he greeted Hazel who was outfitted in one of the high-style fashion numbers she'd picked up at I. Magnin's. "Just like a member of the Strategic Concepts Evaluation Group should look on her night out on the town."

"Our cover as members of the SCEG has been blown higher than a nesting eagle," I said as we sat down. "Or weren't you listening?"

"It's a smorgasbord here," Erikson said to Hazel. "What kind of wine would you like with your meal?"

Hazel examined the food tastefully arranged on a rec-

tangular table. Eight or ten different kinds of cold cuts, six or eight different kinds of cheeses, three kinds of potato salad, pickles, relishes, and bowls of fruit adorned the major portion of the bar. At one end steam trays contained the hot food. Hazel sighed happily as she contemplated the array, and finally decided upon an all-purpose rosé wine to complement the meal.

A smiling waitress told us we were expected to make four trips around the groaning board. The third plateful did me in before I ever reached the hot food trays, but Hazel and Erikson both made the fourth trip. I sat and watched them finish up, feeling like a stuffed goose. "Two more customers like you and the place loses money for a week," I informed them.

Erikson poured the last of the wine into our glasses. "What's your opinion of Virgil Peterson?" he asked Hazel.

"An educated fool," I said before she could answer. "An ivory tower type. A disaffected intellectual who couldn't make a living at anything but what he's doing."

"He's not that bad," Hazel protested. "He's been helpful. He showed me the files in the crime study library, which is one area that's supposed to be off-limits except to personnel with special clearance."

"I wonder if Emory Williams is one of those with special clearance?" Erikson asked.

"I don't know, but perhaps I can find out," Hazel said. "He's a mystery man. He surely doesn't spend much time at IDA."

"This computer-betting operation—" Erikson shook his head. "I thought I'd heard everything in government, but this is a new one. Does it actually work?"

"They're winning bets, usually at small prices." Hazel frowned. "But something doesn't add up. I know most of the group now, and none of them seems to be prospering particularly. It's almost as though the money is going into a special fund, perhaps to be divided up later. I don't understand it."

"What about this crime study library?" Erikson asked Hazel.

"It's amazing," she said promptly. "Virgil showed me one huge file just on the specifics of the types of security—or the lack of it—in police stations in large cities. There's a study on the security-vulnerability of government buildings in Washington. There's a file on the research done on the Weatherman attempt to blow up the Washington Monument and the Statue of Liberty, there's one on the University of Wisconsin bomb tragedy, and an analysis of sabotage potential in the case of places like Mount Rushmore and Hoover Dam. This was later extended to cover the vulnerability of strategic highway interchanges and major bridges."

"I'd like to know how many people were shown these files by Peterson," Erikson said.

"I doubt very many," Hazel replied. "We were in the library once when Sidney Reynolds walked in. He was quite upset with Virgil because I was with him. Reynolds spoke quite sharply to Virgil about a breach of security, but then glossed it over."

"Hazel was supposed to receive full cooperation, anyway," I pointed out to Erikson, "but why would the personnel director have clearance to the crime studies library? I should think his function would be strictly administrative."

"I'd think so, too," Erikson admitted. "But that's quite a can of worms out there. I can usually ask any questions I like inside a government facility, but Washington has me hobbled on this one because the students are momentarily quiet on the campuses in regard to war-connected studies done by groups like IDA, and Washington doesn't want the status quo upset by anything that might lead to newspaper headlines." He considered Hazel who was finishing her wine. "Any chance of finding out what's happening to the racetrack winnings if it's not going to IDA individuals?"

"I'll mouse around," Hazel promised.

"There's a bunch of information in those files that would benefit someone in my former line of work," I told Erikson.

"I thought of that," he acknowledged. "For a long time I thought it was too far-fetched that there could be a connection between the IDA files and what happened at Aqueduct, even though Washington sent me to sniff out that trail. Now I'm not sure."

"Wouldn't it be something if a Grade-A criminal mind somehow eased himself into the IDA crime studies library?" I said.

"It wouldn't need to be nearly that direct," Erikson said. "The Grade-A criminal mind would only need to have contact with someone within the setup."

"But they're all such theoretical studies," Hazel objected. "And so detached in viewpoint."

Erikson made an impatient gesture before he continued speaking.

CHAPTER VIII

"I think it's time I stoppered a few rat holes; I've been taking too much for granted," Erikson declared. "But IDA isn't the place to determine Black Knight involvement. We need a black man who can keep an ear to the ground in Black Knight territory." I had a feeling even before he said it what his next words would be. "Do you think Candy Kane would attempt a penetration of the Black Knights?"

"Hell, no," I said bluntly. "Why should he? He's Nassau-born and British-educated. He has no local political interest, and on principle I think he'd almost surely object to working against those of the same color."

"His lack of political interest might be an advantage if other motivation could be supplied," Erikson pointed out.

"There's one thing," I said slowly. "Maybe two. He's broke, and he hates it; and he's already done a little noodling around in the East Bay that resulted in two brothers following him to the California Street apartment. The brothers probably thought that Candy's clothes and British accent were a put-on to hide that he was an agent for the man."

"Were they satisfied? It could be a plus if he's passed a check-point already. What was he doing there?"

"I doubt that he knows. Trying to get back into action somehow."

"Have him call me," Erikson made up his mind. "I'll set up a meeting with him. It might work."

We left the Little Sweden after I promised Erikson I'd call Candy. I noticed that Karl was still limping slightly from his knife wound, but his eye-gash and other facial bruises had already begun to heal, and were barely noticeable.

I called Candy when Hazel and I returned to the Roosevelt. "What's it about?" he asked cautiously when I gave him the message.

"Why don't you call him and find out?"

That terminated the conversation.

Two hours later the phone rang, and it was Erikson. "Candy's on the team," he said laconically.

"He is?" I was really surprised. "What did you have to promise him?"

"Cash, for one thing. Action for another. I don't think Candy likes himself particularly right now."

"What are you going to have him do?"

"He's already on his way to start doing it. I sent him to the East Bay to see if he can pick up any strings on the Knights who seem to have dematerialized." There was a short pause. "I told him to report to you."

"That's cozy. Why?"

"I might not be available all the time."

"Where are you going?" I asked suspiciously. "And if you've been given another assignment, I'll jerk Hazel right out of IDA."

"Nothing like that. It's just that I'm in and out of the office all the time. Candy will probably be back from Oakland around 2:30 or 3:00 A.M. to talk to you."

"You mean I'm supposed to wait up for him?" I demanded.

"You can call me in the morning if he has any news," Erikson said, and the connection was gone.

Hazel was stretched out on her back on the bed, laughing at the expression on my face when I turned away from the phone. "The Great White Father?"

"The Great White Father is liable to find himself playing solitaire," I grumbled.

Hazel yawned widely. "Now that I'm a working girl, I need my beauty sleep."

"I can take a hint," I said.

I took the self-service elevator down to the lobby. I stopped at the switchboard and told the operator not to put any calls through to the room, but to page me in the lobby. If Candy got in trouble, I didn't want Hazel hearing it on the phone in our room.

I ran across the street to the newsstand in front of the Foster Cafeteria and picked up the racing form for the next day. There wasn't much point to it since we spent our days at the IDA building now, but it would give me something to do. I settled down in a lobby armchair and began to put the pencil to the ten-race card.

At midnight I walked to the delicatessen on the corner and picked up a carton of chocolate milk and a bag of cookies. The entrance doors were locked at one o'clock, and Al, the night man, looked over those wanting in carefully before he opened the doors. I fell asleep a couple of times only to be awakened by the tap-tap of a key on glass as some night-owl summoned Al to admit him.

Then I woke to find Al shaking me. "Guy at the door says he wants to see you," he said gruffly.

I looked, and Candy was standing outside. I nodded, and Al went to the door and let him in. I got up from my chair and Candy and I sat down on a sofa. He looked pleased with himself. I could see he'd been drinking, but he was carrying himself all right. He was wearing a pink ruffled shirt and orange slacks, hardly my idea of the appropriate costume for an undercover man.

"Nothing much to report," he began. "I went to the Commodore Bar and had a couple of —"

"You went back to the Commodore after what happened the night of the fire?"

"Could you pick out anyone on the other side that night?" he demanded. "Out of fifty or sixty people?" I didn't answer. "So I snuggled up at the bar next to this cute-looking, high-yellow chick and we got to talking," he

continued. "The bartender came along every so often and gave me the eye, trying to intimidate me, so I finally asked the chick if she was married to him. She smiled and said he was just the watchdog for her boyfriend. So the next time the bartender eased into our scene I dumped a glass of beer on him."

"How to win friends and influence people. You—"

"Oh, I apologized," Candy said. "But he got the message. All around me there's this jive talk going on. Not English, not American, not even slang. Some of it's hard to understand. I didn't have any trouble makin' out, though, there's a lot of unhappiness in that neighborhood because the fuzz, and particularly the federal fuzz, are payin' too much attention to black group activities."

"What about the girl?"

"I'm coming to that. I told her I was the p.r. man for a Nassau public relations outfit that was looking for a black chick to model stockings on TV, and I asked her how her legs were. Meantime I poured the drinks into her, and rubbed her leg. Finally I asked her if she had a place. She said yes, so we went there, and I balled her." Candy looked as though he was going to smack his lips at the remembrance. "I told her that her legs were great and there was nothing the matter with the rest of her, either."

Candy's huge hands shaped concentric circles in the air. "Women got to come on with you after a session like that," he continued, "so next thing she told me about her badass boyfriend. His name is Tom Carter, and seemed to expect when she told me I'd take off with my pants in my hand." He snorted loudly.

My interest was growing. Tom Carter was one of the two names furnished me by Robert "The Schemer" Frenz as a criminal activist, and later cited to Erikson by Washington as a political activist. It didn't have to be the same Tom Carter, but—

"Did the girl say anything about the Black Knights, Candy?"

"Sure. She laid it on me, trying to impress me about this

Carter, who's supposed to be passing the word that the Knights are going to make an example of some of the smartass pig helpers at the IDA place in Berkeley. She didn't say Black Knights for quite awhile, but when I caught on where her drift was I asked her what Carter meant. She said he'd been raving about everything from chopping somebody into mincemeat to blowing up the building."

I didn't like what I was hearing. Hazel might very well be considered a pig helper. With hard-core fanatics like the Knights, anything was possible. "What else?" I asked.

"That's about it," Candy said. "I'm going back tomorrow night."

"Better stay away from the girl except in a public place."

"I think not." Candy sounded very British as he said it. "She's a warm bit of fluff." He knew I was thinking about Chen Yi in the apartment on California Street, and he said it defiantly. "See you here tomorrow night?"

"Unless you hear something different in the meantime."

Al unlocked the door again and let Candy out.

I sat there thinking it over, then made up my mind. Al was the night switchboard operator as well as desk clerk, and I didn't want him overhearing the conversation, so I went to a pay phone and called Erikson. Despite the hour, I felt sure he'd have some kind of lash-up arrangement that would let him take the call even if he wasn't at the office.

The phone rang five times before he answered. "Yes?" he said as crisply as though it was nine in the morning.

I repeated Candy's story.

"How did he find all that out so quickly?" Erikson asked.

"By taking Tom Carter's woman out of the Commodore Bar to her place and applying deep meat massage. You've hired yourself a man with a death wish, Karl."

"Don't be foolish," he said impatiently.

"What the hell's foolish about it? He's doubled his risk.

He can get killed now for messing with Carter's woman whether she mentions he's asking questions about the Black Knights or not."

"How did you leave it with him?"

"He said he's going back tomorrow night."

"Good. I'll probably call you at the IDA office tomorrow. Today, I mean."

"Listen, if the Knights really make a move out there, I don't want Hazel standing in front of the locomotive."

"Your concern is misplaced, Earl. IDA represents the establishment, so it's the only target of militant and peacenik groups."

"Bombs are no respecters of individuals, I seem to have read someplace."

"Did Candy mention bombs?"

"Not specifically, no. As a generality."

"You're a worrier, Earl."

"I find it keeps me upright, while non-worriers tend to be placed horizontal on marble slabs."

"Goodnight," he said abruptly.

I went upstairs, let myself into the room without waking Hazel, and went to bed.

Despite Erikson's remark, he didn't telephone me at the IDA office that day. And I waited from twelve to three in the Roosevelt lobby that night to find that Candy had no additional information of any substance when he finally arrived. "Plenty rumors floating aroun' the streets over there," he reported, "but nothing definite. The young, hairy types are getting themselves worked up, though. Something's cooking."

His shiny black features were again creased in a self-satisfied smile. "How's Carter's chick?" I asked casually.

Candy's smile became a smirk. "In the greatest shape you ever saw." he assured me with a chuckle.

"Where's Carter while all this is going on?"

"Who cares?" Candy shrugged indifferently.

"I care! Erikson cares. Why the hell do you think you were sent there?"

But Candy refused to become ruffled. When he was ready to leave, I gave him Hazel's office phone number at IDA. "Because you can't reach me here during the day," I explained.

He nodded and placed it in a wallet noticeably fatter. Expense money from Erikson, I concluded.

After two nights' short sleep, Hazel had difficulty waking me in the morning. I sat half-asleep at my desk in her office while she made her customary early-morning round of the acquaintances she had made so quickly. When she returned, I could see she was nervous about something. "Trouble?" I asked.

"No, no," she said quickly. "At least I don't think so. But Karl will want to know what I just heard. Ralph Broda of the IDA computer-betting group couldn't wait to tell me that day before yesterday they won a $5000 bet at 7-1 odds. He was especially tickled because I'd told them the trainer said the horse always ran better from a post position near the rail, and it left from the No. 2 gate. Ralph felt that could have made the difference. But there was something else."

"Yes?" I said when she paused for dramatic effect.

"You remember Karl asked me before for the names of all those in the computer-betting group but I was never able to find out who actually headed it up? Well, this morning Ralph let it slip that the treasurer of the group is Sidney Reynolds."

"That sour ball?" I said, and then the meaning of what she'd said hit me. "Treasurer? Why would they need a treasurer?"

"I don't know. But that's what Ralph called him."

"What does Virgil have to say about all this?"

"I could probably find out more about it from him except he didn't come in to work yesterday and so far hasn't shown up today."

I called Erikson, but a metallic voice directed me to leave a message. I asked to have Erikson call Drake. Hazel had disappeared, and when I looked for her I found her out in the corridor where Sidney Reynolds was chat-

ting with her. Looking at the man, it was hard to picture him as a dangerous radical. He seemed much more the type to be dangerous to a susceptible woman via a flaw in his lovemaking technique which crushed her beneath his bulk.

Hazel's phone rang an hour later, and after answering it, she held it out to me. "What's on your mind?" Erikson's voice said without preamble.

I gave him Hazel's information. "How about this creep Reynolds banking for the computer-betting group?" I concluded.

"I'd surely like to know what they're doing with the money," Erikson said. "Hazel still feels that the individual members aren't benefiting?"

"Correct. Maybe there's an agreement there'll be no split until they reach a certain total."

"I had the names of those in the group checked after Hazel first gave them to me," Erikson went on, "and the only common denominator I can find is that all of them were members of anti-war groups at one time or another, going back to college in some cases like young Peterson's."

"And now they've suddenly turned moneymakers," I said. Erikson remained silent. "You haven't said anything lately about the charred file and the newspaper clippings we found at the Black Knight headquarters, Karl. About its possible connection to the itinerary of the two visiting Vice-Presidents, I mean."

"For a time I thought that was going to link up with something going on at IDA, assuming a Black Knights connection with IDA," he returned. "Now I feel I've got a foot each on the backs of two different horses."

"Don't you mean three horses? What about the Aqueduct affair?"

"I'm about to award the Black Knights the Distinguished Crime Cross with oak leaf clusters for that one. Everything points to them, and a number of things point to a possible IDA connection, but again there's no indication of where the money's going."

"But everyone is raising money," I said. "There's your common denominator between the two groups."

"Yes," Erikson said slowly, but he didn't sound convinced. "I wonder—" He hesitated. "There's another connection, the fact that Virgil Peterson is so friendly with Professor Emory Williams who I'm almost sure is an advisor to the Black Knights. Williams, by the way, is in London."

"That will relieve Hazel. She was wondering why she couldn't turn up any trace of him here."

"I haven't been able to pin down the Williams-Black Knights connection, but I'm working on it. Can Hazel find out anything more from Peterson?"

"He hasn't come to work for a couple of days."

"When he does, turn her loose on him. And tell her to keep pushing on where those track winnings are going. Peterson could probably tell her that, too."

"Hazel keeps insisting that Peterson isn't the type to be involved in anything sinister." I could hear Erikson's snort. "She wanted me to tell you also that a large shipment of books was just received for the secret studies library, and that the shipment was to replace books which had mysteriously disappeared."

"I never knew a library that didn't have pilferage, Earl."

"You don't consider it significant that the pilferer is making himself an expert on bomb use, building destruction, bridge demolition, and sabotage tactics?"

"You're assuming it's the same man."

"Assuming I'm right, and assuming he studied his lessons, he has quite a capability now."

"I can't argue with that, but where's the proof that it's the main thrust in this situation? I have to think—" Erikson paused. "My Washington phone is ringing," he interrupted himself. "I'll talk to you later."

I wondered if Erikson or anyone else were ever going to pull all the loose threads together.

I tried to look busy for an hour while Hazel circulated in the building, talking to her horseplaying pals. It was a

measure of Erikson's instinct in talking her into taking on the IDA assignment that although the pals knew I was a horseplayer, too, they didn't talk to me.

When she returned to the office, she was shaking her head. "After that big winning bet the other day, I thought the computer-betting bunch would really be baling it in," she said. "But they haven't made a bet since, and no one I talked to knows why."

"They've probably got the computers whirring, looking for a sure thing. You know how gamblers turn conservative when they get ahead, Hazel. It's when they're behind that they mortgage the farm and throw good money after bad."

"Yes, well—" she frowned. "It still doesn't feel right."

"Let Erikson sweat it."

"Maybe I should put myself in Sidney Reynolds' way and see if he'll talk about it? He should know the rationale if anyone does."

"Not too far in his way," I warned, and Hazel was smiling when she left the office.

I made a trip to the men's room and upon my return found a message from the phone center to call a number I didn't recognize. I had already started to pick up the phone when I realized it was an Oakland number. I replaced the phone and left the office for the pay phone sector. The only person calling me from Oakland should be Candy Kane, and I didn't want anyone walking in on me in the midst of the conversation.

I dialed the number and waited. When a woman's voice answered, I thought I had the wrong number. "Is this—I'm returning a call," I stumbled.

"You Mister Drake?" a soft female voice inquired.

"That's right."

"Candy says you should take your woman and get out of where you are."

I waited, but the woman said nothing more. "Is that all? What else did he say?"

"That's all. To get out."

"Why isn't he calling himself? What—"

"I said too much already." There was no mistaking the nervousness in the voice as the disconnect clicked in my ear.

I left the pay phone and went in search of Hazel. Halfway through the corridor which connected the building-wings I saw people rushing about at its far end, and I speeded up. Sidney Reynolds burst through the connecting glass doors and darted past me, going in the opposite direction. His face was a sweaty, doughy-looking mess. I half-turned to pursue him, but then I turned around again. I still didn't know where Hazel was.

A buzz of voices inside the door of one of the maintenance storage areas drew me in that direction. ". . . opened the door and there he was!" a shrill, excited voice was saying as I tried to see through and over a milling mob that had surged into the area. I still couldn't locate Hazel.

The crowd in the doorway parted suddenly, forming a rough semicircle. In its center I saw the blood-drenched body of Virgil Peterson on the floor, his clothes slashed and ripped. The face was contorted, the glasses gone. Rigor mortis plainly had set in hours, possibly days, before. Near the body was an open closet door behind which pails, brooms, and mops were stored. Virgil's body had been found in the closet as was evidenced by the dark smears on the floor.

The reason for the look on Sidney Reynolds' face was clear. The commingled black and white faces peering down at the rigid body reflected a similar horror. Virgil Peterson had died an extremely unpleasant death. He had been tortured by a knife-expert before he died. His face was hardly recognizable, and two fingers on the right hand were bloody stumps.

One of the maintenance men knelt beside the body, drawing my attention to a square of paper pinned to the body's chest. "What does it say?" someone asked in a hushed tone.

" 'Others more important will also be eliminated'," the kneeling man read. He sat back on his heels and looked around at the crowd. "What does it mean?"

I backed out of the mob. Hazel wasn't there, and I had to find her. I stopped when I saw her hurrying along the corridor. "Oh, Earl!" she exclaimed at sight of me. "I just heard! Is it true?"

"It's true," I said, taking her arm and turning her around. I led her away while she kept glancing over her shoulder at the group still crowded into the entrance of the maintenance area. "You don't want to see it."

I stationed her in front of the pay telephone booths. "Stand right there where I can see you," I told her. It was unlikely that Hazel's office phone could have been bugged without Erikson knowing it, but this was no time to take chances. When Erikson came on the line, I gave him the news quickly, along with Candy's message. "I'm taking Hazel out of here," I concluded.

I was braced for an argument but I got none. "Have her clean out her desk," Erikson agreed. "Stay with her while she does it. I'll be right out there myself."

When I rejoined Hazel outside the booth, her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "It's such a waste!" she insisted indignantly while I ushered her to the office.

"Pack all the Washington material," I told her, glad to be able to give her something to do. I knew her natural resilience would soon assert itself.

While she was clearing out her desk and mine, two of the computer-betting group appeared at the office door with vacant, shocked expressions. I shooed them away. Right now I didn't want to talk to anyone and I didn't want Hazel to, either. When I closed the door behind the pair I saw a police sergeant down the hall deploying two uniformed patrolmen near the building entrance. It gave me an uneasy feeling. If Erikson didn't appear and use his umbrella to get us out, I'd have some damned awkward questions to answer.

But he appeared while Hazel was still cramming papers into two briefcases and a large box. "Stay here while I have a word with the campus police and the local police, and then we'll leave," he said to me. I was sure his intention was to keep local interference clear of what was left

of his operation, although at the moment it didn't appear there was much to save.

"If we find out who killed Virgil, I'd like a crack at him myself!" Hazel vowed angrily. When she completed her packing, I moved briefcases and box near the door.

Erikson returned in twenty minutes. No one had come near us during the interval. "Let's go," he said briefly, and picked up one of the briefcases. Hazel took the other and I carried the box. Erikson led the way to a side door outside which a dark sedan was parked. He showed something in his hand to the policeman at the door, and the man nodded and stepped aside. Erikson motioned us to sit in the front seat together, and he took the wheel.

No one stopped us as we wheeled off the IDA grounds. Erikson remained silent until we rolled up the Ashby Avenue ramp to cross over the Eastshore Freeway and swung down the outer loop to merge with the southbound traffic heading for the Bay Bridge. "I hate to give up the advantage of having you two on the ground there," he said then, "but it's too risky now."

He drove for a few moments before speaking again. "The thing that really bothers me is that we have so many seemingly unrelated pieces. And Washington continues to fog the issue. If I talk to three different people, I get three different directives. All I'm getting is static." He moved the car out of the turn onto the bridge into the middle lane of the five leading to the toll plaza.

"I don't know that I blame Washington, though," Hazel said. "The information we've uncovered doesn't seem to mesh with anything that's gone before. The whole thing seems unreal."

"What happened to Virgil was real enough," I reminded her.

"That's why I had to get you out of there," Erikson said. "There's no way of knowing what Virgil might have admitted before he died. From the looks of him, they kept him alive for quite awhile." Beside me, I felt Hazel shiver. "I had to assume that among other things he blew Hazel's cover."

"I don't think it was too secure, anyway," I said.

Erikson turned his head to look at me as he slowed for the toll booth. "Why do you say that?"

I moved against the car door as Hazel crowded closer to me while Erikson searched his pocket for change. "The people in IDA hadn't seemed as friendly the last couple of days. Not so many dropped into the office, and even among those who did the attitude seemed different."

Erikson flipped two quarters into the wire-mesh toll basket. A bell rang, the pedestal light turned from red to green, and we moved ahead. "It's possible the IDA people were concerned about a campus flare-up by students reacting to the unprecedented security coverage for the meeting between the two Vice Presidents," he said. "As the supposedly newest operation direct from the Pentagon, Hazel, you could be considered something of a lightning rod. The pressure building up around this visit is fantastic."

"It's certainly tailor-made for a demonstration," Hazel said.

"The Black Knights won't demonstrate," I declared. "If they do anything, it will be something violent."

"Perhaps," Erikson said, "but I still think it's unlikely. The Knights haven't the numbers or the organization to incite a large-scale riot. If they have plans, it's my judgment it will be for something a few dedicated fanatics think they could pull off."

"Not a political kidnapping?" Hazel asked.

"I can't believe they would be that stupid," Erikson answered as we entered the Yerba Buena-Treasure Island tunnel. "Any imbecile should realize we'll have the equivalent of a human fence around the two men wherever they go. That wouldn't prevent a well-planned assassination attempt, of course. But have they the brains for that in the face of the obvious safeguards?"

"The answer is yes if they have the same brain behind them that they did on the Aqueduct caper," I said.

"But they fouled that one up," Hazel remarked.

"It's my job to see they don't even get a chance to foul up this visit," Erikson said softly.

Hazel shaded her eyes with her hand as we came out of the tunnel into the sunlight. I pulled down the sun-visor in front of me. "What about the evaluation studies we found in the restricted files of the IDA library?" Hazel asked. "Those pointing out the vulnerability of government installations and public buildings like the Post Office and the old Mint? If the veeps were to pass by or be inside one when it was blown up—"

"If we're thinking of political demonstrations," Erikson said, "it's undoubtedly going to involve various salt-and-pepper peacenik groups, that's to say white-and-black combinations. And simple political demonstrations I don't give a damn about. That we can handle. It's the radical activists that I'm concerned about; but with the single exception of the Aqueduct affair, the Black Knights haven't looked like the Weathermen."

"Back up a minute," I said. "What Hazel is saying is that anyone with clearance into the IDA secret studies library would have access to mighty detailed information on which to develop a number of plans. With a solid contact inside IDA, just one, the Black Knights could acquire a ready-made plan and have a chance of carrying it out. Don't forget that Virgil said there was a startling similarity between the Aqueduct attempt and a study on file in the IDA library."

"But you're suggesting absolute IDA collusion," Erikson said. "By someone, but we know how intensive and detailed the investigation is for IDA personnel. They are really checked out with a fine-tooth comb to a point where it took governmental collusion to overcome it in our case. The new investigative procedures introduced last year are especially stringent."

"How often is a recheck run on IDA people previously cleared?"

Erikson paused. His fingertips drummed lightly on the steering wheel. "I started to say continually, but with so

many new people being hired, those already in the classified category would come last. It's an almost impossible task to keep clearances up to date. It's supposed to be done yearly, but I wouldn't doubt that in some instances the time between rechecks runs close to five years."

"So a wormy apple would really have time to become rotten."

Erikson made no reply. We rode across the rest of the bridge as part of a moving mosaic of automobiles. "Look at it this way, Karl," I said finally. "Drumfire means something. It was splattered all over the Black Knights abandoned headquarters, and there was the section of burned file-folder with the partial name on it."

"You're jumping to conclusions," Erikson said. "Even though you found those things together in the wastebasket, it doesn't mean they were kept together in that particular file folder. Probably half a dozen people were pitching items into that basket, and they might have landed together."

"You don't really believe that, do you, Karl?" I said. "What about the newspaper clippings of the Vice-Presidents' visit we found in the Black Knights file?"

"I haven't overlooked the Black Knight threat," Erikson said. "I double-checked the Vice-Presidents' motorcade route, and it doesn't pass anywhere near a Drumfire-listed installation."

"Okay, okay," I said. "What comes next?"

"I got in touch with Candy after your call to me, and I asked him to meet us at your room in the Hotel Roosevelt." Erikson's tone was crisp. "Depending upon what he has to say, I believe I'll have something for you to do."

"We're out of this thing now," I started to object.

"We'll do it," Hazel interposed. "For Virgil."

I started to say that I thought Virgil was a lost sheep who had met the inevitable fate of his kind when wolves appeared, but how do you change a woman's mind when she's made it up?

Nobody said anything for the balance of the drive to the Roosevelt.

CHAPTER IX

Five people made a tight fit in the hotel room.

Hazel and Chen Yi sat on opposite corners at the foot of the bed while I occupied the wooden luggage rack. Erikson straddled the room's only straight-backed chair which he'd spun around from its position tucked into the kneehole of the desk. Candy was sprawled in the depths of the armchair.

"Go ahead, Candy," Erikson directed.

"Righto," Candy responded. He was puffing a crooked, black cheroot. He seemed to have regained some of his former self-assurance. His attitude, in fact, appeared almost cocky, in sharp contrast to his previous subdued demeanor. I thought it was Chen Yi now who appeared subdued.

Candy waved the cigar like a concertmaster's baton. "The young bucks I've been watching in Oakland have faded from the scene, apparently all at once and all together," he began. "And the Knights have acquired a barge onto which they've loaded dynamite."

There was a moment's silence. "Perhaps the Knights have set themselves up in a new headquarters," I suggested.

"I'm sure I'd have heard about it," Candy said. He glanced at Chen Yi, and then away. The Chinese girl's expression was impassive. "I did hear," Candy continued, "although not too reliably since it was from a couple of

foul-mouthed hangers-on, that the brothers were movin' out to take a whack at the white establishment."

"A raid of some kind might tie in with the Knights' acquisition of the barge," Erikson said.

"The word is that two thousand changed hands on the barge deal," Candy said. "Not necessarily a purchase price or even a down payment. It could have been a bribe to a night watchman to look the other way."

"What kind of barge?" Hazel asked.

"I heard it described as a rusting old scow apparently not fit for anything except to float a couple tons of garbage out to sea. But the word is the Knights bought eight hundred dollars' worth of dynamite an' loaded it aboard."

"To blow the bottom out?"

"Who knows?" Candy said. "The consensus seems to be that the Knights have come into a bit of money lately. A bloody lighter to act as a storage container for a cache of explosives seems rather a clever idea."

"But a forty-foot barge to hide a couple hundred sticks of dynamite seems a bit much," I said. "That much dynamite could be hidden in a brace of baling buckets."

"Not quite," Erikson intervened. "Now listen to this—before I left my office to go to Berkeley this morning, a Navy intelligence flash came over the teletype reporting a successful penetration of the munitions storage area at Wendover, Utah, last night."

"You mean an outright raid?" I asked incredulously.

"I mean a successful raid," Erikson affirmed.

"It's not hard to understand," Hazel said. "There's hundreds of acres of land at Wendover with ammunition bunkers scattered all over it. Protecting an installation that size against a determined raid would be a real problem."

"You learned about the Wendover ammo dumps from the IDA secret library?" Erikson asked Hazel.

"No," she answered. "I knew about Wendover before I ever heard about IDA. Any private pilot who flies over Nevada and Utah is familiar with the Wendover Munitions Storage Depot. He's got to be if he wants to keep his license. Wendover is an established restricted air space no

one can fly through or over. It's on every aeronautical chart ever printed."

"But was there anything in the IDA files about Wendover?" Erikson persisted.

"I never saw it, but I suppose it could easily have been included as a potential sabotage point."

"How much did they get?" I asked.

Erikson grimaced. "The teletype report gave an estimate of the loss, and counting incendiaries, small arms ammo, artillery shells, and bombs, they got away with more than five tons of stuff. They must have had a truck convoy, but so far we haven't picked up a trace of it."

"Artillery shells and bombs!" I shook my head. "The idea of the barge doesn't sound so foolish now. These boys sound like they're going to war."

"It sounds like they have the capability," Candy added.

"You said a forty-foot barge?" Erikson said to Candy, who nodded. "That means a beam of at least fifteen feet, so—sure, they could get all the munitions aboard the barge."

"Enough to supply a regiment for a week," I said. "Or make like another Port Chicago incident if it all went up at the same time."

"What could this black group actually be up to if all this fits together?" Hazel asked.

Erikson rose from his chair and began to pace the confined space with poorly concealed frustrated nervous energy. "It looks as though we're faced with a barge loaded with the explosive equivalent of a small nuclear weapon, hidden somewhere in San Francisco Bay, in the hands of a militant group that apparently wouldn't hesitate to use it against a government facility."

There was another silence after that bald statement of facts. "You're not forgetting your two Vice Presidents?" I said to Erikson.

"Hardly," Erikson responded. "But they're not coming by boat, so no one is going to float a barge next to a ship's waterline and blow the vice presidential entourage into rice-sized fragments."

"But they're flying into San Francisco International Airport where Air Force One will be landing, according to the papers," Hazel pointed out. "And the airport sticks right out into the bay."

"Two sides of the airport jut into the bay," Erikson replied, "but the Vice Presidents and their parties will be perfectly safe. The ramps and loading zones are at least two miles from any water boundary."

"Whoa, there!" Hazel said. "Why do possible victims have to be on the ground? If we're talking about a miniature Hiroshima, the blast will reach upward at least a couple of hundred feet. Air Force One won't be much more than fifty feet high when it comes over the end of any runway that extends to the water's edge. When the big bird passes overhead, all you'd need is someone in place to push a plunger at the right moment."

"Blimey, love, you could be right," Candy said around his half-smoked cigar.

Erikson remained unperturbed. "I'd like to think that was the actual scheme. We'd be home free. The IDA protection plan went into this aspect in some detail. It considered the possibility of someone attempting to destroy Air Force One at any point en route, including in-flight interception by an armed aircraft, a sniper with a rifle or machinegun, a rocket, or even some type of antiaircraft weapon planted near takeoff or landing points. One of the easiest things to guard against is an attempt made from afloat. The bay will be cleared of any unauthorized watercraft, and no traffic will be permitted on the surface under the landing approaches. In addition, the pilots always make an unorthodox landing approach so that no one knows which runway will be used until the very last moment."

"Then we can forget the Black Knights as a threat to the visiting firemen," Hazel said.

"Not forget," Erikson cautioned. "They obviously have something in mind. Perhaps a demonstration or an incident in connection with an installation located on the bay." He ticked off his fingers as he spoke. "The Navy has

shipyards, supply centers, and airfields. There's the Oakland Army Terminal, The Presidio, and even Fort Mason. Under cover of darkness or fog, a barge could be towed into any area. Right into Fisherman's Wharf, for that matter."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "You said 'towed'. The barge isn't going to move by itself. The Black Knights have to come up with some way of towing it. And not just a skiff with an outboard motor. Right?"

"You've got something there," Erikson said slowly. He turned it over in his mind. "How about it, Candy? Hear anything about a tugboat? No," he corrected himself, "it wouldn't have to be a tug. Anything with three hundred horsepower could get it underway and keep it moving at about five knots."

"I'll have to pass on that," Candy said. "There must be a boat available to them somewhere, though. They've moved the scow once, and as Earl said, it can't be paddled."

"I'll have a check made on every boat registered from San Diego to Portland," Erikson said, "and I'll have the list matched against every name we've got on the Berkeley campus, including the student body, the faculty, and the entire IDA organization. We might pull a red hot chestnut out of the fire. I'll get on it right away." He started for the door, then paused. "Where did you get the information on the barge?" he asked Candy.

"From Tom Carter's bird," Candy said easily.

Hazel looked swiftly at Chen Yi, who was staring down at her lap.

"Get some lunch," Erikson said to me. "I'll know in a couple of hours whether this is another dead end. If it isn't, we'll have to move quickly."

He went out the door into the corridor.

"Look at what time it is!" Hazel said with attempted brightness. "I can certainly use some lunch." Chen Yi rose from the bed silently. Candy still had his newly regained swagger, but he was glum looking.

We walked to Bardelli's on O'Farrell. The long, dark,

rectangular-shaped restaurant was filled with Montgomery Street types drinking their lunches. The food was excellent, but no one seemed to have much appetite. "Shouldn't we go back to the apartment, Candy?" Chen Yi said quietly when the meal was completed.

"Let's stay together until we hear from Erikson," I proposed. "He may have something for us to do."

I was almost sure what Erikson would have in mind for Candy to do, and it wasn't going to do Chen Yi's peace of mind any good.

Nor was I wrong.

We hadn't been back at the Roosevelt more than twenty minutes when Erikson telephoned. I answered the ring. "Daylight at the end of the tunnel," he said, and I could hear the lift in his voice. "Two names on the IDA list own boats capable of towing a barge such as Candy described. There's a Professor George B. Hall who has a thirty-four-foot Matthews cabin cruiser, and Sidney Reynolds who has a thirty-eight-foot—"

"Reynolds!" I exclaimed.

"I know," Erikson said. "It could be a coincidence, but he has a thirty-eight-foot Seaswift sportsfisherman. I want you to send Candy back to soul country to keep his ear to the ground. He might even learn where the barge is hidden. If we find the barge, we can forget the tow boat. Conversely, if we can find and immobilize the tow boat, the barge isn't going anywhere. You work on that, without Hazel. Grubbing around marinas and docks is no place for a woman."

"Point me in the right direction and I'll check the IDA leads," I said.

"Right. Professor Hall's boat is reported moored at the Berkeley Marina at the end of University Avenue extension, slip fifty-eight. Reynolds' boat is at a dock at Point Isabel, exact location unspecified."

"Can I reach you at Fort Mason?"

"Leave a message if I'm not here. I have a dozen other possibles to check out, but I feel that those are the two prime leads."

"What was that about Reynolds?" Hazel asked when I hung up.

"He owns a boat capable of doing the towing," I explained. I looked at Candy. "Erikson wants you back on the job in the East Bay."

Candy nodded.

Chen Yi's beautiful face remained inscrutable, but I wondered what she was thinking about Candy's going back to Tom Carter's bird.

By one of those the-world-is-smaller-than-you-think coincidences, slip fifty-eight at the Berkeley Marina at the end of University Avenue extension turned out to be less than half a mile from Golden Gate Fields racetrack. I was sure it was coincidence since the racetrack wasn't yet forward-looking enough to permit placement of bets via cabin cruiser.

The slip was empty, and it took me ten minutes to find any life on the dock at all. Most of the boats seemed to be owned by weekend sailors who kept them cocooned under well-tied tarps. I finally located a weatherbeaten old salt dozing in a deck chair on the fantail of a water-weary twenty-footer. A fishing line over the stern dangled slackly in the oily water. The oldtimer cocked an uninquisitive eye at me from under a tattered skipper's cap as I rocked his boat when I stepped aboard it.

"Hall?" he said in answer to my query. I pointed to the vacant slip. "Oh, the p'fessor." He spat on the deck and then rubbed it out with his shoe, indicating his stance on higher education more fully than a ten-volume edition on the subject. "He's gone."

"I can see he's gone. Do you know where?"

"Didn't say. Pulled out a couple days ago. Ain't been back." The Downeast twang suggested a rocky-coast Maine transplant.

"Was he alone?"

A spark ignited in the sunken eyes. "Who're you?"

"A fellow looking for a thirty-four foot Matthews that's for sale and moored in slip fifty-eight at the Berkeley

Marina," I invented a personality. "It's supposed to be available for inspection."

The spark died out. "Hoped you was at least a bill collector," the old-timer grumbled. "I don't take to those uppity types. Waal, I don't know if he was alone when he left. I did see him headed on a bearin' that'd put him north of Alcatraz."

I thanked the old man and left. Erikson would have ways of tracing a ship at sea. Like a lot of other hidden resources available to him, I was sure that Erikson—or his boss—had the U.S. Coast Guard tucked in his hip pocket.

I went off in search of Sidney Reynolds' boat. The dockman at Point Isabel, in addition to expressing surprise at my story that Dr. Reynolds was putting his craft up for sale, told me that Reynolds had transferred his mooring to Point Bonita.

Thirty minutes later I found the Seaswift sportsfisherman without difficulty. The hull had a green-slime ring around it and its paint was peeling and checking under the gunwales. The protective tarps were patched and smeared with oil and dirt. The boat had been hard used, but there was no way to tell if this had been recently or not.

I went as far out on the walkway as I could and looked at the stern. The dull-gold letters ARTEMIS confirmed the identification according to Erikson's information. The white transom was no dirtier than the rest of the boat, but there was a gouge in the paint where someone had backed into something. My imagination at once pictured an inexperienced skipper being rammed by something towed behind.

I got out of there before someone came along to inquire if I were a marine insurance inspector. At none of the three locations had I seen any evidence of a rusting, forty-foot barge. On this stretch of coast there were perhaps a half million natural hiding places where such a barge could be concealed. I told Erikson so when I rang him from a pay station in El Cerrito.

"Unless Candy finds someone with the information and the guts to spill it, we'll never locate that barge," I argued.

"There are literally miles of coastal nooks and crannies. Even if you pulled the Seventh Fleet back to do the job, it could take weeks."

"How about from the air?" Erikson inquired.

"You're going to ask Hazel to become a reconnaissance pilot? She has trouble flying level when she has nothing else to do but that. Buzzing around at treetop level with her head hanging out to watch the ground, she'd crash in the middle of her first turn. That's out."

"I didn't mean Hazel. I might be able to pull a few strings and get a couple of helicopters and pilots assigned to our team. Do you mind touring the Bay Area in a bubble?"

"If it keeps Hazel on the ground, okay," I agreed, but without much enthusiasm.

"Maybe we can still get in a couple hours this afternoon," Erikson said. "By the time you get back to Fort Mason I'll have search patterns and maps drawn up, and I'll give you a new type walkie-talkie that's compact but has clear-tone transmission for twenty miles at ground level. We can keep in touch without you constantly looking for phone booths."

"Which reminds me," I said. "The charges I'm running up on this rented car are fierce. Why don't you scrounge me a government car?"

"I don't want you in a government car. Leave your rental car receipts with me. I'll see you're reimbursed."

"The government spendthrift," I said. "Why the walkie-talkie, then, to save the government a few dimes?"

"I doubt there's any saving. The two mini-cell batteries that they use cost twenty-four dollars each.

"Lo, the poor taxpayer."

"Get back to the office and we'll get started."

Karl Erikson plainly was not in the mood for light banter.

So we searched.

We got in three hours the first day, and by noon of the second my tailbone was growing calluses from sitting in a

chopper. My ears rang from the constant throbbing of the engine and the whistling of the rotating vanes. My eyes were tired and bloodshot from searching the wildly varied shorelines for anything that looked like a rust-encrusted barge or a misplaced cabin cruiser.

Despite the close quarters, the helicopter pilot and I remained strangers. The helicopters Erikson had rustled up had flown up from Travis Air Force Base and picked us up at The Presidio. My pilot was an Air Force lieutenant who obviously enjoyed his work. He concentrated on the job and did very little talking. I didn't do much myself. Hovering fifty feet above water and beaches for that length of time made me as close to seasick as I want to get.

I flew with the new walkie-talkie in my lap and the radio earphones on my head. Occasionally Erikson would cut in with a remark from his helicopter, but this was infrequent. At first I thought it would be easy, because Erikson had the Coast Guard supply us with special hydrographic charts of the Bay so well-marked that it seemed every abandoned or derelict boat, barge, sunken buoy, barrel, or Indian war canoe showed up on it. But nothing happened. We couldn't find either the barge or the cruiser.

Late afternoon of the second day Erikson curtailed his flight without explanation. When my eyeballs were on the verge of developing hernias, my pilot called it off, too. We returned to The Presidio and cushioned down at the polo ground end of Crissey Field where Erikson's helicopter was already parked.

Just as on the previous afternoon, a black sedan with U.S. government plates was waiting to drive me to the parking lot next to the Fort Mason Officers' Mess. I wondered what the driver thought about my habit—and Erikson's on previous trips—of ducking through the gap in the shrubbery when the Rathskeller entrance to the club was so close at hand.

I ran the barrier of Erikson's cinder-block building's steel doors and presented myself in his office. The expression on his face told me his day had been no better than mine. I knew he was increasingly concerned because the

Vice Presidents were due at nine in the morning two days hence. I went to the map of the Bay Area Erikson had mounted on a wall and outlined with grease pencil the section my pilot had covered on today's flight. "We'll be at this until Christmas," I complained.

Erikson's grunt was pregnant with acquiescent disgust.

"You look as happy as a man who's just missed a one-foot downhill putt," I continued. Karl was studying a four-foot yellow strip of paper bearing dense blocks of teletype-printing from top to bottom. "How about getting some extra help?"

"Impossible," he said without looking up from what he was reading. "Especially now." He jabbed a blunt forefinger at the paper on his desk.

"More trouble?"

"The same one, but compounded." He leaned back in his chair and looked up at me. "You can't begin to imagine the small army of security men assigned to this area already. There's a couple of freight-car loads of federals besides all the locals. Even so, I can't extract a single man from any of these overlapping cadres because I can't convince anyone our problem has relative priority. There'll be plenty of help available after the visit of the VPs, but will I need it then?"

He slapped at the teletype-message. "And you know what? With two days to go, they've changed the plan!"

"Changed the—"

The teletype machine behind him pinged twice and then its keys began to clatter. Erikson jumped to his feet and spun around to crouch over the unit. He ripped a strip of paper out of the machine when it became silent. "The knuckleheads!" he roared in a voice that would have beaten back a typhoon on a quarterdeck. "*Look* at this! I warned them, but they're scrubbing all our carefully planned arrangements!"

I'd never seen Erikson so close to losing control of himself. He came back to his desk and turned the original banner of yellow teletype-paper at me so I could read it. The body of the message was detailed and clear, as if it

had been abstracted from a prepared news release. "Where's it from?" I asked, scanning the meaningless abbreviations and symbols at the head of the message.

"The White House."

I looked at him to see if he was kidding. He wasn't. I returned to the message. Briefly, it said that the North Vietnamese government in Hanoi had decided to release a large group of U.S. prisoners of war, mostly Air Force pilots. The men, a group numbering fifty-six officers, were being airlifted back to the U.S. There followed an alphabetical list of names and ranks, and I noticed seven colonels.

"There'll be happy people around when this is broadcast," I said.

He looked at me as though I was out of my mind. "Finish it!" he barked.

When I resumed reading, I began to see what was disturbing him. An executive decision had been made to direct the repatriation flight to land at Hamilton Air Force Base twenty miles north of San Francisco. The flight would arrive the same day the VP's flew into International Airport, and to provide the returning prisoners with the honors due them, our Vice President and his Mexican counterpart would personally be on hand to welcome them.

The sudden change in schedule would cause the official motorcade route to be altered so it could travel across the Bay into Marin County where the mercy flight would land at the military airfield. "A lot of people will have to be moved around to cover the new route, and they'll be stretched out over a longer distance," I remarked, "but it's not really your problem, is it?"

"It's the principle of the thing!" Erikson growled. "Someone is putting political advantage ahead of common sense. Changing a parade route at the last moment is dangerous. Every security chief involved out here has objected."

"Then maybe the White House will drop the idea."

"That's what burns my ass!" Erikson bellowed in one of

the few lapses from the queen's English I'd ever heard from him. "The White House has known for nearly a week that these prisoners were being released, but they kept it to themselves until they decided how best they could capitalize upon it. That's not what the inner circle is saying publicly, of course. They're claiming they were using the time to get the Mexican government to approve the change in plans. The whole thing is politics from top to bottom!"

He waved the strip of paper he had torn from the teletype at me. "This is the final put-down. I'm to go back to my knitting and stop bothering Washington with my messages. I came in early this afternoon, remember? I'd received word in the 'copter there was a message for me here. That was the long one you're looking at."

The words were tumbling out of him so fast he had to pause for breath. "So I used the special line," he gestured toward the green telephone I'd never seen used, "and gave my reasons why the motorcade route shouldn't be changed. Then if we couldn't change the politicians' minds, I suggested going to Hamilton by air. So what happens?" He read from the message in his hand. " 'Adequate study has been given to all alternatives. Executive decision will stand and is now irreversible.' Unquote."

"So you tried."

But he couldn't turn off. "Stupid nincompoops!" he snorted.

" 'Adequate study has been given to all alternatives,' " I repeated. "Does that mean the new motorcade route has been bouncing around IDA since Washington got word of the prisoner release?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

"Suppose someone inside IDA has been filtering information to the Black Knights right along and included this tidbit?"

He started to say something, stopped, then began again. "You know how compartmented that group is. That item of news wouldn't go beyond the top executive level."

"But the top executive level would pass the new route

on to the crime studies group for their evaluation," I pointed out.

Erikson started to reach for his telephone, then withdrew his hand. "Let's go talk to Hazel," he said.

My rental car supplied the transportation to the Roosevelt. Erikson kept muttering under his breath. Once he remarked aloud that from the present wind direction and damp feel of the air, fog could delay our early-morning 'copter reconnaissance. I hoped he was right. Fog would mean I could sleep in and regain my land legs which seemed to be sadly missing.

Hazel was dressing for dinner. I'd promised to take her to the Starlite Roof of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel before dinner, but Erikson's presence postponed an early departure. He briefed Hazel, then started firing questions. "Did Virgil Peterson ever do any talking to you about the vice-presidential visit, Hazel?"

"No," she replied. "He never volunteered information. Even at the last—" she stopped and swallowed, and I realized how much young Peterson's savage death had shaken her. "I'm sure he was still uncertain of us. If it hadn't been for the horseracing, he might never have spoken to me at all."

"How far down do you feel news of the motorcade change might have filtered?"

"The reason for it I'm sure would have remained at the top level, but the crime studies group almost surely would have been given it as another factor to weigh in providing protection."

"And among the top dogs who would have had the entire story would be Sidney Reynolds and Professor George Hall," I said.

"I'd say both," Hazel agreed, "if Hall were around."

"Hall could be anchored somewhere nearby and we just haven't found him," Erikson said.

"You've checked on his background?" I asked.

"We've wrung it out. He's a bachelor, so there's no family to question. He isn't visiting any known relatives. None of his girl friends are expecting a visit. IDA personnel

records show he has a vacation due him, but there's no record of him having applied for time off. The Coast Guard hasn't been able to raise his boat via radio-telephone or by making a sighting. I think he's had a mishap and gone under to become fish-food, or he's anchored in one of the Bay's natural hiding places with the barge."

"Then that wipes out Sidney Reynolds," Hazel suggested. "His boat hasn't been moved." She glanced at me for verification and I nodded.

"Neither of them is wiped out until we locate the barge," Erikson answered. "None of the other leads I ran down amounted to a damn. It almost has to be one of these two, or else we're completely wrong about an IDA tie-in to the Black Knights, and the closer we get to the deadline on this thing the less I believe that."

"So on the scoreboard we show an oversized zero," I said.

"I never saw such a bunch of loose ends," Erikson fretted. "Instead of putting something together, it seems to be falling farther apart. Even Candy keeps 'coming up with negatives. The Black Knights are still underground."

"After the demonstration we saw in the alley on Catlett Street, let's hope they stay there," I said feelingly.

"What demonstration?" Hazel demanded.

"A protest march," I said quickly.

"You know what bothers me most about all this?" Erikson's voice cut across the stare Hazel was giving me. "The lack of activity on anyone's part while the tempo of events is otherwise increasing. I've got the goddamndest feeling that someone is stretched out in the weeds, waiting."

Nobody had anything else to contribute.

We went down to the lobby and out to the street where Erikson gloomily caught a cab back to Fort Mason.

Hazel and I took another to the Starlite Roof.

CHAPTER X

In the morning we started again.

Although it wasn't full sunrise when I parked the rental car at the Fort Mason Officers' Club, the black government sedan was already waiting to take us to the polo field at The Presidio. Wisps of fog trailed through the parking lot. There was no sign of Erikson, and I pushed through the shrubbery and went down the path to the blockhouse.

I negotiated the steel doors and was admitted to Erikson's office by a pipe-smoking, redheaded man I'd never seen before. The man made no attempt to introduce himself to me. Erikson was on the telephone, and his voice was far in the upper register. His features were crimson, and the knuckles on the hand tightly clutching the phone were white. "Don't give a damn, what kind of security is that?" he was roaring. "Don't try to tell me it's normal! Nothing's been normal in the area since this Vice Presidential visit was laid on! I don't care what your primary responsibility is, you find those weapons!"

He banged down the phone and stared at me without really seeing me. His complexion was nearly as choleric as I'd ever seen it. "Did you ever get the feeling the world is coming to pieces and nobody gives a damn?" he demanded of no one in particular.

The pipe-smoking redhead shrugged and left the office.

"What's gone wrong now, Karl?" I asked in a voice I tried to make soothing.

"Everything!" he replied with heavy irony. "But princi-

pally a phone message letting me know that a group of black men made an armed raid on a military warehouse at Port Chicago last night. Port Chicago is merely the West Coast staging area for the shipment of arms to Viet Nam." He leveled a finger at me across his desk. "D'you know what they got?" He was breathing heavily. "They trucked away five Viper rockets, three MAW's, and two Sidewinder missiles. They—"

"Viper rockets?" I said.

He gestured irritably. "Built by Lockheed. Thirty-inch type fired by line-of-sight aiming. A solid fuel rocket that travels at supersonic speed. It's basically an anti-tank weapon and carries an incendiary warhead. The MAW was developed for the Army and was the first guided missile which could be carried and fired by one man with a warhead large enough to destroy heavily armored vehicles. What a lovely load of lethal machinery being ferried around the countryside!"

"Do you think it means—"

But in his impatience he wouldn't let me complete a sentence. "It means the Black Knights have advanced overnight from rifle capability to missile capability!" he snapped.

"What makes you think it was the Black Knights?"

"Are you prepared to believe that coincidentally another militarily-organized group of blacks staged this raid?"

I wasn't.

"It changes the whole damn equation," Erikson brooded. "If we can't find—" His phone rang, and he picked it up. "Yes," he said. He glanced at me. "Candy," he said out of the side of his mouth. "What do you mean, gone?" he demanded, his voice rising again. "Disappeared? What?" The fingers of his free hand drummed ominously on the desk top. "What's that about rockets?" he blurted, then listened again. "All right," he said finally. "Stay with it. Call the office here every two hours whether you've learned anything new or not."

He replaced the phone receiver with a strange delicacy

when contrasted with the way he had slammed it into the cradle before. "The particular Knights that Candy has been keeping an eye on have disappeared," he said quietly. "Right into the woodwork. You'll recall that he told us that before, but I got the impression he thought it was a temporary thing. Now he can't even locate the girl."

"What was that about rockets?"

"Candy says there's whispers all over the East Bay area about the rocket abduction and how the troops are supposed to be deploying them at a point away from downtown San Francisco. That's all he knows."

"You mean setting them up?" I said. "What kind of technical knowledge does that take?"

"Weren't you the one who told me that the Black Knights' ex-headquarters had all the flavor of a military barracks with ample evidence of technical expertise?"

"Well, yes, but—"

Erikson picked up his telephone again. I stood there while he made five telephone calls in quick succession. The gist of the conversation from his end was the same each time. He was calling local and imported security officers and trying to secure their cooperation in an all-out search for the missiles.

Each time the response—which I could make out from his increasingly frustrated remarks—was to the effect that it was Erikson's or someone else's headache and they were all far too busy with their own rigidly structured assignments to divert any effort toward pursuing a threat so vague.

"Vague!" Erikson snorted, springing to his feet behind his desk after the fifth call. "I'd like to believe it. I'd really like to believe it!" He strode to a wall and peered at a detailed map of San Francisco County to which a smaller map of Marin County had been patched on after the motorcade's late-breaking change of route to include the visit with the released prisoners of war across the Bay at Hamilton Air Force Base had been learned.

"If this setup is for real, it's absolutely ingenious," Erik-

son continued, staring at the map. "The usual protection for VIP's is close-in all along the route. Now we have a possible threat posed from God knows how far away."

"You're thinking they might try to hit the motorcade with a rocket? Those things aren't that accurate, are they?"

"Can you imagine the effect of even a near-miss? But in the hands of trained men they *are* accurate. They're designed to destroy armored vehicles and tanks, but fortunately there aren't too many places along the route, including the new territory, where the motorcade vehicles will be in flat, open terrain." Erikson's voice was growing more hopeful. He cocked his head sideways at the map. "But if they even get to fire one—God!"

"The streets will be filled with people."

"The streets and surrounding buildings," Erikson said.

"It's the buildings that will keep them from getting a straight shot," I said.

"Possibly," Erikson said. He traced a line on the map with his finger. "Discounting the first run into town along the Lick Memorial Freeway from San Francisco International Airport which we've had checked and double-checked, and which will be well-guarded since this was the original route and remains unchanged, there's no open, level terrain until the motorcade gets all the way to the Golden Gate Bridge."

He had forgotten me temporarily; he was talking out loud to himself. "But the approach to the bridge is semicircular. The open span between the towers is comparatively short, and the minimum speed across the bridge is set at 85 mph. Both approaches will be guarded so that no one can get within a couple of miles of any vantage point where a straight shot might be possible. No, I almost wish they'd try something while the motorcade is on the bridge."

"The bridge itself would make one hell of a target, though." Erikson looked at me. "A talking point. A demonstrating point."

"The bridge itself?" Erikson echoed. "No. It's built like

a fortress and certainly capable of withstanding missiles designed primarily to knock out heavy tanks at long range. No, I can't see the bridge as the target." He paused for a moment. "Nor do I care, frankly. My job is to protect the lives of the two Vice Presidents, not preventing damage to the bridge. The vehicles in the motorcade would have to be the target, but at 85 mph? There are far better areas for the Knights to select for their purpose."

"You're the military weapons-and-tactics expert," I conceded. "But somehow all these loose bits fit together, and we still don't know how."

Erikson didn't deny it.

In somber mood he led the way from his office, and we went outside to the government sedan which drove us to Crissey Field and the helicopters from Travis Air Force Base.

The day's search produced nothing, and Erikson called it off at four-thirty in the afternoon when the fog started to come in again. He was in a glum, morose state of mind when we met at Fort Mason. "Not a damn thing has gone right during this search mission," he groused. "Tomorrow the motorcade runs the gauntlet and we're not ready."

My eyes were tired from the wearisome flight in the bumpy helicopter. "Do you have a specific plan for tomorrow?" I asked Erikson.

He grimaced. "I haven't been successful in convincing anyone that the Black Knights are going to be active tomorrow, but I'm not restricted from pursuing my own theory."

"Which is?"

"More of the same. I feel we're doing the right thing even if we don't have very much to show for it. If a serious assassination attempt is to be made on the Vice Presidents, everything we've learned lately says it won't be downtown. The barge, the cruisers, even the missiles point to an attempt from a distance. A waterfront effort, in other words. And if it is, the boats are the key element."

Vigor had returned to Erikson's voice during his semi-soliloquy. "I'm going to put Candy in the helicopter with

you tomorrow to add an extra pair of eyes," he continued. "When you start out in the morning, make your first check on Sidney Reynolds' sportsfisherman. I'll continue to scour the area for George Hall's thirty-four-foot cabin cruiser. If the fog even lets us take off." He stared absently at the grid-marked map on the wall. "The best break we could get tomorrow would be a fog so heavy the motorcade would be socked in all along the route."

"It's not impossible," I said. "I've seen fog so thick on the Golden Gate Bridge you couldn't see two car lengths. Your motorcade won't be crossing the bridge at 85 mph in weather like that."

"I won't be worrying about black ex-artillerymen lining up on the glass-bubbled cars, either." Erikson turned abruptly away from the map. "I'll pick you up at the hotel in the morning. I still have a couple of meetings to attend tonight."

"Preaching the missile gospel?"

"Correct, but I'm not going to make any converts. At some point in every plan like this things tend to become frozen. That's why last-minute changes are such a bad idea."

I left Erikson's office and drove to the Roosevelt. When I entered our room, Hazel was hanging up the telephone. After the day I'd had, she looked disgustingly fresh and rested. "I've just been talking to Chen Yi," she said, "telling her that Buchanan Field called me to say a mechanic had found a hydraulic leak around a seal on the landing gear of the Cessna. I told them to fix it, but I think I'll drive out there in the morning to check it out. Chen Yi said she'd go with me. She needs to get out. It will do her good. Candy—" Hazel didn't finish it.

I knew what she meant about Candy but I certainly didn't want to talk about it. I was pleased to hear that they wouldn't be watching the official parade from anywhere along the route. "Okay," I said. "Wait till I shower and we'll go out and eat. I'm not going to be much company tonight. I'm bushed, and I'm going to hit the sack early."

The shower's hot water revived me temporarily, and we walked five blocks to Rocca's on Golden Gate Avenue. I let Hazel do the honors. She ordered chicken Kiev for us both. Twice while waiting for it to arrive at the table I found my head nodding over my glass of Pinot Chardonnay. It was an exceptionally good meal, but I lacked something of the fine edge necessary to appreciate its nuances.

Back at the hotel, I made no apologies; I undressed and crawled into bed. Just behind my eyes were dancing visions of sunlight on water, white sand, green coves, rocky inlets, and hundreds and hundreds of boats. Even with my eyes closed the vista kept unrolling like a Cinerama film. Finally I fell into an uneasy slumber.

When I woke, Hazel was sitting in the armchair, reading. "You've been groaning, snorting, and wheezing," she informed me. "What's the trouble?"

"Nothing. What time is it?"

"Just after midnight."

"I'm hungry again." I slid out of bed and reached for my pants. "I'll walk around to the delicatessen on the corner and get us a bite."

In pants, pajama top, and slippers, I went down in the elevator to the lobby. It wasn't late enough for Al, the night man, to have the doors locked. The street was wet with fog, and gray patches swirled around the upper floors of the buildings on the Jones Street hill. At the delicatessen I loaded up with potato salad, cold cuts, pickles, and Seven-Up.

We didn't leave a crumb.

Hazel turned out the light and came to bed with me.

Even though I'd already had several hours' sleep, I blacked out again before I'd drawn a dozen breaths.

It was still dark in the room when a knocking at the door aroused me. I got out of bed and stumbled toward it, barking a toe on a wooden luggage rack. "Who is it?" I asked with a hand on the chain latch.

"Erikson."

I opened the door. Erikson was standing in the hallway with Candy and Chen Yi. "What the hell time is it?" I asked.

"Five o'clock," Erikson said. "We've got to eat and get out to Fort Mason."

"Anything come out of the meetings last night?"

"Nothing noteworthy."

I dressed hurriedly, meantime engaging in the futile pastime of trying to assess the present relationship between Candy and Chen Yi. Both seemed withdrawn.

"Good luck," Hazel said when we were ready to leave.

I waved from the door, and we left Hazel and Chen Yi in the hotel room. All of the regular restaurants were still closed, and I directed Erikson who was driving one of the omnipresent black government sedans to an all-night restaurant on Taylor Street named Penny's. There was a minimum of conversation while we packed in scrambled eggs, sausage, toast, and coffee. Erikson kept glancing through the damp-streaked window at the fog outside.

Back in the car, we were almost at Fort Mason before Erikson spoke again. "We have made one slight gain," he said. "We located Professor Hall's boat and the professor in Canada. So there's no problem with him. Since Hall's boat is accounted for, I'll scout the route ahead of the motorcade in my helicopter. You and Candy concentrate on Reynolds' cruiser, at least until you hear differently from me."

Inside the blockhouse at Fort Mason, Erikson picked up the telephone immediately and spoke to one of the helicopter pilots at The Presidio. "How are conditions over the Bay?" he asked. "Thick, eh? What's the prediction? All right, we'll meet you at the 'copters, and then we'll all stand by and be ready to go the moment it thins out enough so we can take off."

Candy sniffed the moist air when we went outside. "It will dawn soon," he predicted with the confidence of a man who has seen several thousand dawns following a night at the gaming table.

"Batteries holding up in your walkie-talkie?" Erikson said to me.

"Fine. It's aboard the chopper."

The government sedan carried us to The Presidio. We stepped out and walked across the damp turf to the polo field where the dimly visible helicopters crouched in the heavy mist like prehistoric animals. The helicopter pilots saluted Erikson.

Then we stood around and waited. "Weathermen in major cities which have lots of air traffic are the best in the weather service," Erikson said to me once in a low tone. "They're very keen on local conditions. The met officer has predicted that we should get fog breakup within an hour."

So we waited some more while the sky grew lighter and then the word finally came that the fog was thinning over the Bay.

We boarded the 'copters and rose in a threshing of rotor blades from the green turf of the polo field, lurching away toward the still indistinguishable waterfront. Helicopters never fly in a straight line regardless of how it may appear from the ground. We crabbed through heavy patches of fog in the direction of Point Bonita, our immediate target. Between occasional breaks in the gray blanket I could see sunshine across the Bay, over Oakland, but most of the time we were immersed in a damp, clinging mist that beaded the windows.

I had looked down upon Point Bonita and Sidney Reynolds' moored boat so many times in the past few days I could have drawn a map of the area from memory. The Air Force pilot leaned toward me and tapped his headset reassuringly. "Communications okay," he said. Beside me, Candy stared through the bubble at the glimpses of Bay and rocky points beneath us. He didn't look exactly apprehensive, but I got the impression he'd have felt more comfortable bellied up to a green felt table with a pair of dice in his hand.

The pilot pointed downward and banked slightly. We

hovered until an exceptionally thick patch of fog drifted clear beneath us, and then I had a quick look at Point Bonita through the trailing streamers.

I looked, then looked again.

There was no doubt about it: Sidney Reynolds' thirty-eight-footer was no longer in its slip.

I looked at the pilot for confirmation. "Gone!" he shouted above the noisy vibrations inside the 'copter shell, then stabbed a forefinger vigorously downward. "Look out there at the end of the dock!"

I had been concentrating on the shore end where the boat had been moored. When I shifted my gaze, I saw what had excited the pilot. Sprawled on the dock, out almost at its end, was the prostrate figure of a man.

"Set this thing down as close to the dock as you can!" I yelled. "But first raise Erikson on your radio and tell him Reynolds' boat has disappeared!"

The pilot coolly began to perform both operations at the same time. Twice we had to hold while the thick fog momentarily enveloped us while he sought a place to set the chopper down. Then we could see the waters of the Bay and the spit of land below us again.

And the prostrate figure on the dock, closer now. As nearly as I could tell the figure wasn't moving at all.

The 'copter settled down with a jarring thump, and I threw over the locking lever on the bubble door. "Stay with the radio!" I bellowed at the pilot, then motioned Candy to accompany me.

We jumped down upon a piece of turf that seemed handkerchief-sized amidst the rocky outcropping and set out at a run for the dock a hundred yards away. I passed the empty slip where Reynolds' boat had been tied up with Candy's heavy tread sounding on the dock planking right behind me. "Look at that!" Candy muttered as we ran. I had already seen the bright splash of blood near the empty slip. A trail of blood-drops on the planking led directly to the figure at the end of the dock.

The man was face downward, and the back of his white sport shirt was oozing blood from a dozen knife-wounds. I

turned him over and looked down at the sweat-stained, fish-white face of Sidney Reynolds. He had been stabbed several times in front, also, in the chest and stomach, and a knife-puncture in his throat pulsed blood slowly.

Reynolds was conscious. I knew not for long; any one of four or five of his wounds was enough to finish him off. His mouth worked when he saw me. "They've got—boat!" he got out in a whistling gasp. He was taking air in through the throat-puncture. Then he said something I couldn't understand.

I knelt down on the dock beside him. Candy knelt, too. He placed his folded handkerchief over Reynolds' throat wound and held it lightly in place. When Reynolds spoke again, his voice was clearer and stronger. "Peace Patriots —seven of us—in IDA—planned blow up barge—loaded with explosives—at bridge—just before motorcade approaches—"

"The Golden Gate Bridge?" I interrupted.

He nodded weakly. "As part of—peace demonstration," he resumed. "Intended—blow up barge—in Bay—so explosion would rock—VIPs but not hurt—anyone or destroy anything. No operating technique ourselves—so used—Black Knights." Beads of sweat stood out on his face from his effort to make himself understood.

"Learned last night—blacks never intended—demonstration but—assassination while motorcade—on bridge," the halting voice went on. "Thought I could—stop them. My boat—to be used—for towing barge—but this morning—they attacked me—and took boat."

I unlimbered the walkie-talkie slung over my shoulder and raised its antenna. A touch on my leg caused me to look down again. Reynolds had gripped me feebly to draw my attention. "Explosives-laden barge—to be set off—by rocket fired—from shore while—motorcade on bridge," he got out in painful gulps. "Barge to be—floated against base of—one of bridge towers." His eyes closed. I could see he was breathing very shallowly.

I called Erikson on the walkie-talkie. When he acknowledged, I gave it to him fast. "The IDA peaceniks

were planning a monumental demonstration as a protest, but the blacks were assassination-minded all along," I concluded. "They cut Reynolds to pieces here and have taken his boat to tow the barge."

"Ask him where the barge was located so we can get a bearing on the direction it will be moving in from!" Erikson rapped at me.

I looked down at Reynolds again. His head had toppled to one side, and Candy had just removed the wadded handkerchief from his throat-wound. No blood was pulsing from it now. "He just checked out," I said. "Permanently."

"Get back up in the air and locate that barge!" Erikson ordered. "I'll fly the motorcade route and check for rocket launchsites. It will have to be someplace with a line-of-sight view of the bridge towers."

"Why does the deployment have to be along the motorcade route? Couldn't it be off to one side?"

"I hope it is, but I doubt it."

I saw what he meant. Even if we were lucky enough to find the barge and stop it, if the rocket emplacement was along the motorcade route the Black Knights' rocket crew could fire directly into the motorcade on the bridge.

"I can't help you search for that barge!" Erikson said urgently. "Find it and stop it!"

I took a final look at the remains of Sidney Reynolds, a mute testimonial to the ineffectiveness of intellectuals in dealing with ruthless activists, and then Candy and I ran back to the helicopter. I leaned in through the bubble door and shouted at the pilot. "Do we have any weapons aboard? We're supposed to find the boat which is now towing a barge and put an immediate stop to it."

"Nary a weapon!" the pilot yelled back.

I had my automatic, of course. But how could Erikson expect me to pit a 9mm handgun against the armament that the Black Knights had at their disposal? If we found the towed barge and made an overt move toward it, the rifles of the Black Knights would knock us out of the sky long before I got within pistol range.

Even if we somehow managed to approach undetected and I did trigger off a dynamite stick with a lucky 9mm Parabellum cartridge, the load of erupting explosives would put everything within a quarter-mile of it into orbit, just as Hazel had predicted in the case of an explosion at the end of the San Francisco International Airport runways. And going into orbit included the helicopter and myself.

I quickly found an excuse to abandon that approach.

I had no trouble convincing myself that on a forty-foot barge the chance of hitting a comparatively small target like a stick of dynamite, with all the munitions concealed under tarps as they would undoubtedly be, was almost nil.

Candy and I scrambled into the 'copter and fastened ourselves in our seats.

The idling rotor blades picked up speed and the chopper shuddered before rising heavily.

We roared out over the Bay still covered with large patches of drifting fog.

CHAPTER XI

The helicopter took up a search position bracketing our side of the Bay. It seemed a hopeless task to me, because we constantly were in and out of layers of fog which blanketed us completely at times before we ran into thinner patches which permitted glimpses of the bluish-purple water below.

Twice the pilot swooped the 'copter down in a huge arc to take a closer look at a sports motorboat breasting the choppy waves. Each time we drew a blank. After the second occurrence I leaned toward the pilot who sat on my right. Candy was sitting directly behind me. "No time for anything now but the brass ring," I shouted. "Look for a cruiser towing a barge, period."

He nodded without removing his eyes from the Bay as he swung the chopper in slow circles. I wondered where Erikson was. Probably over the sparsely inhabited area west and north of the Golden Gate Bridge, in the Fort Baker-Fort Barry area. It was difficult to picture a rocket emplacement anywhere else.

The pilot inclined his head toward me, and I moved closer. "The fog's beginning to lift and break up now," he bawled, "but until we can get underneath it we aren't going to see much looking sideways through this cloud bank. We could go upstairs a couple of thousand feet to look down through and probably have better luck." I started to reply, okaying his decision, but he stopped me by placing his hand on my arm. I could see by his inner-

directed look that he was listening to his radio. He confirmed this by tapping his earphones. "Have you got a girlfriend by the name of Andrews who flies a Cessna?" he bellowed.

Immediately I felt concerned. "That's right. She was going to take it up this morning from Buchanan Field near Concord. Why?"

The pilot didn't answer; he was listening to his radio again. He began to smile finally, and I experienced a sense of relief. If he was smiling, the news couldn't be too bad. "She must really be something, this girlfriend of yours," he said, leaning toward me again. "She wants to talk to you from her plane. She knew these birds were stationed at Travis, so she called Travis tower and wouldn't get off the air until they gave her a tactical radio frequency through which she could reach us."

"How can she communicate with an Air Force helicopter?"

"She's got a broad-band transceiver in her aircraft that covers both VHF and UHF ranges. They've assigned her a tactical channel and she's setting her transmitter now. We'll stand by." He punched a channel selector button on his own radio set, then waited. His previous smile had turned into a broad grin.

"What's so damn funny?" I asked irritably.

"I can just imagine the mess she made," the pilot said, and started to laugh. "No one could take off or land while she was badgering the tower, and that included a squadron of fighters that had been flying over International Airport in a salute to the Vice Presidents. Man, I'll bet the colonel crapped his pants. He's just ordered her to land at Travis. Probably wants to personally confiscate her licence and turn her over to the FAA. If she—"

The pilot lifted his headphones off suddenly and placed them on my head. He pointed to the button on the mike. "There she is. Say anything you want. She can't get in any deeper."

"Earl?" the radio said in my ear. "Earl Drake, do you read me?"

"I hear you, Hazel. What is it?"

"Thank God I reached you. I think you're way off your target. I'm up here about fifteen hundred feet between Alcatraz and Sausalito, looking down through the fog. To the west it's really thin and patchy. I can see all of the Golden Gate Bridge now. I can see you, too, if you're just west of Alcatraz."

I looked down at the island in the Bay. "That's us."

"Okay, the barge you're hunting—it's a rectangular-shaped thing, isn't it? And rusty?"

"Correct."

"There's one right below us, being towed by a small white boat. The tide must be going out, because they're moving at a steady clip toward the south tower of the bridge. They're about a mile from it now."

"We're on our way!" I said. "Clear the hell out of the area."

The listening pilot gave a quick nod and brought the 'copter seat pressing harder against my butt as he surged the chopper upward and flew at top speed just feet above the water under the rolling fog bank which gradually thinned. We emerged suddenly into sunlight, and we all exclaimed simultaneously. Less than a mile away a sports-fisherman was towing a barge exactly as Hazel had said.

The pilot zoomed up to 300 feet where we could see the situation better. I pulled the automatic from my belt holster and motioned for the pilot to go in on a long, downward diagonal. He nodded assent. "How are you going to stop them?" Candy said in my ear. He was leaning over the back of the intervening seat.

"Shoot up the pilothouse if we can get close enough," I said.

"You'd have to be lucky to get 'em all. We're bound to bt outnumbered and outgunned as well." Candy's expression was concerned. "Blimey, would you look at that scowl"

I was looking, and I shared Candy's concern. The barge we were rapidly approaching was low in the water and

heaped head-high from stem to stern with cargo covered with torn and sunbleached tarpaulins.

"If that's all explosives like it's supposed to be," Candy said grimly, "it looks like enough blast-power to obliterate the bridge an' take out half the city, too!"

Certainly if the Black Knights succeeded in lodging the lethally loaded barge against a tower footing of the bridge and ignited the munitions with a rocket launched from the west bank, which now seemed to be the plan, the bridge would be destroyed. And if the timing was right, the resulting fireball would envelop the motorcade passing over the bridge.

I changed my mind about making a pass at the pilothouse. Unless I cleaned house we wouldn't stand a chance of stopping the cruiser, given the dedicated fanatics bound to be aboard it. We'd have a better chance trying to cut loose the barge. I nudged the listening pilot. "Has this thing got a ladder?"

He nodded. "Nylon," he said. "But they'd pick you off like fresh grapes on your way down it."

"There's probably not more'n two or three of 'em," Candy argued, "but they'll be studs. An' they'll be on the boat, not the barge. Let's take a hack at boardin' the barge."

Candy's thoughts had paralleled my own. "Get the ladder out," I told the pilot. "I'll go down and Candy will follow me."

"How am I going to cover you from up here with just my skinny blade?" Candy demanded. "I'll make the first drop, an' if anyone spots me going down the ladder, you just pick 'em off fast an' clean with your popgun."

There was no time to make a better plan. The pilot tripped a switch and two little doors opened, dumping a neatly coiled nylon ladder down through the hole. The waters of the Bay, more greenish in this area, looked sickeningly close. Candy removed his jacket, dropped into the hole, and started down the wildly swaying ladder as nimbly as a spider. I crouched over the open hole and tried to watch both Candy and the barge above which we were

hovering. It just wasn't possible that the boarding attempt would go unnoticed.

Salt mist came up through the open trap doors, and my eyes started to water. Candy was two rungs from the bottom of the ladder when a huge black man in a wet suit appeared suddenly on the barge's narrow walkway. He held a knife in his hand. I fired, and splinters flew from the wood near his head. He jerked sideways, glancing upward. I fired again, and he clutched his shoulder and backed out of sight, but not before I had a glimpse of a similarly wet-suited figure right behind him.

Candy hit the deck of the barge, skidded, and fell. He regained his feet at once and balanced himself against the heaving motion of the barge in the choppy water. I holstered the automatic and started down the swaying nylon ladder to the barge. The 'copter's rotor blades washed me around like an ungodly game of snap the whip. I had to hold on desperately to keep from being flung off. The next glimpse I had of the barge the two wet-suited blacks were advancing again upon Candy, both crouched low. Sunlight glinted upon the knife in Candy's hand opposed to the two knives nearing him.

I couldn't even draw the automatic while I was fluttering like a leaf in a breeze. At water level, cruiser and barge appeared to be moving much more slowly than when seen from the air. I slid down a couple more ladder rungs, but the pilot had temporarily lost the range and I was hanging off to one side of the barge. He gave it a corrective power surge and jerked me sideways. I barely pulled my legs up in time to keep them from being broken as the bottom edge of the ladder slapped the gunwale of the barge. I was catapulted aboard on hands and knees.

One black was face down on the deck and Candy was grappling with the second man. I looked for the Golden Gate Bridge, and almost yelled. It loomed over us, seemingly almost directly overhead, tremendously high. I ran for the front of the barge, jerking out the automatic again.

When I reached a point where I could look down into the wheelhouse, I thought for a second the craft was steer-

ing itself. Then a black head and arm came into view as a man crouched low at the wheel fired a shot at me. I waited until the next wave lifted the barge higher, exposing more of the man at the wheel. Then I put a slug between his neck and shoulder and another at the base of his skull as he turned to see where he was steering.

The black disappeared completely, and I could feel a quick tremor in the barge's hull under my feet as the cruiser fell off course and began to go dead in the water. I thought for a second the barge with its sluggish but powerful momentum would run over the cruiser, but the sportsfisherman curved to one side. When barge and cruiser were nearly alongside each other, I jumped the six foot gap and dropped down to the flying bridge of the cruiser. From there I scrambled down the ladder to the wheelhouse.

The first look inside told me I was still in trouble. The wheel was flopping loosely despite a black hand still upon a lower spoke as the body on the floor shifted position constantly with the boat's pitching motion. The helmsman had been in the act of lashing the boat's wheel to keep it upon a specific course, one which would wrap boat and barge around opposite sides of the south tower as Reynolds had gasped out to us before he died, thus holding the barge's load of munitions in position. Candy and I had disrupted that particular endeavor.

The huge bridge tower, more than seven hundred feet high, seemed to be almost directly above us as I stepped up to the wheel. I freed its spoke from the clinging dead black hand, then advanced the throttle cautiously. I wished Hazel were with me. I'm no boat operator, but she's an expert. I tried to inch out ahead of the barge again without pulling something loose when the towing cable tightened. I wanted to aim boat and barge out into the Bay, away from the bridge.

There was a thumping noise above my head, and I redrew my previously holstered automatic. Candy appeared in the wheelhouse doorway, weaving with the motion of the boat. I was damn glad to see him. "Let's lash this wheel after we get the barge turned to an open ocean

heading!" I exclaimed. "We can leave the engine just holding it on course while we climb up into the helicopter. The Coast Guard can—"

I stopped. Candy had entered the wheelhouse, and I could see that it wasn't the boat's motion which made him unsteady on his feet. One arm was crooked awkwardly over his chest, and blood was running from his chest down over the arm. His eyes were glazed and there was a froth of blood on his lips.

"Funny," he said. His voice was slow and draggy. All his great strength seemed channeled into the major effort of keeping himself upright. "Told me—his name."

I had the barge lumbering along in the wake of the cruiser again, away from the bridge tower. "His name?" I said over my shoulder.

"Carter." I looked at the gray-faced Candy. "Guy—whose chick—I moved in on. Took my blade—to get his—in me. Prob'ly figured—weren't goin' to—swim far if—rocket hit." Candy advanced toward me where I stood at the wheel, putting one foot carefully in front of the other. "Let me steer," he continued, slurring his words. "Can't climb—'copter ladder anyway. You go." He placed his hands beside mine on the wheel.

He looked more as though the wheel were holding him up than as if he were in control of it. "Where's Carter?" I asked.

His lips came back from his teeth, disclosing more blood. "In the—Bay."

I wasted no more time. Erikson might need help. "Just hold the wheel steady," I said. "I'll call the Coast Guard as soon as I'm back in the chopper and they'll pick you up."

"Okay," he muttered.

I left the wheelhouse and climbed up on the flying bridge. The 'copter was hovering to one side, nylon ladder still dangling, floating in the stiff Bay breeze. I could see the pilot's anxious expression. I motioned him closer, and the 'copter inched toward the cruiser.

I missed the first slow sweep of the ladder which went

past me slightly wide of the mark. In my eagerness to reach it I almost stepped off the edge of the wheelhouse. I had to windmill my arms wildly to retain my balance. The pilot stopped the helicopter's forward motion, allowing the powerboat to overtake him. It was a case of grabbing the ladder in self defense when I was swept into its path. I barely had my feet on a nylon rung when the 'copter swooped upward and arced in a great circle toward the Marin shoreline.

The breeze was numbingly cold. Buffeted by gusts, I struggled up the ladder. It twisted and turned, affording me glimpses of the rapidly diminishing boat and barge below. I pulled myself through the 'copter hatch with what seemed like my last bit of energy and then forced myself to my feet and into my seat alongside the pilot.

We had reached a height that put us slightly above the bridge roadway. We were moving slowly toward the span. The bridge loomed large, but it seemed oddly naked. Not a single vehicle was on the normally busy roadway. Uniformed troops, standing rigidly at attention, were stationed at thirty-foot intervals from end to end.

"Where's the motorcade?" I shouted, having finally recovered enough breath to speak.

"Coming!" the pilot yelled, and gestured.

We were passing directly above the multilane road and the catenaries of the twin suspension cables. To the south the leading wedge of escort motorcycles was just leaving the toll plaza at high speed. "Where's Erikson's chopper?"

The pilot punched a fist straight ahead. "In trouble, I think!"

I stared toward the rocky Marin coastline. "There's three of them now. Where'd the others come from?"

"Your buddy found the rocket-firing site just as you dropped down on the barge. It's on a point in the old Baker military reservation. Soon as he located it, he got things moving. State troopers are moving in from behind, and two Cobra gun ships of the emergency helicopter flight which was standing by went up to join him. He's in

the one closest to the ground. There, see—that's him spotting the target."

I saw the slow-moving shadow on the ground first. Then I saw Erikson's helicopter at the same time I saw a stream of machinegun tracer bullets flurrying in its vicinity. Certain of their target now that the rocket-launching site was revealed, the first of the pair of sleek battle-choppers slanted downward. The companion gun ship followed.

Far in front of the leader, yellow dots peppered the stark hillside. Panicky figures scrambled away from the impact area. We were close enough now to see both terrified black faces and the firing platform on which projectile-like, finned rockets were mounted.

The second Cobra gun ship darted in and matched the blazing light arms fire from the hillside with a withering .50 caliber barrage before zooming up and away. The lead Cobra, already positioned for a second pass, fired a long burst from its machineguns, and the hillside erupted in a sheet of orange-yellow flame that turned green, then purple, and evaporated in dirty-looking smoke.

A giant fist punched our chopper sideways, forcing the pilot to strain at the controls. I tried to locate the helicopter which carried Erikson. I saw it finally, off to one side, dangerously low, but climbing again. It had survived the violent rocket blast ignited by the incendiary machinegun burst.

"He says his tail rotor's vibrating badly, but he'll make it," my pilot reported. "We'll fly along and keep an eye on it for him. We're cleared to return to Travis."

"Call the Coast Guard and give them the location of the barge," I said.

"I did that while you were still on it."

Trailing a damaged helicopter which might lose its tail rotor any second isn't the easiest way to travel while attempting to relax, but I settled down and tried to pull myself together.

At Travis we remained in the air while Erikson's helicopter made a bumpy but safe landing. Then we came

down. We landed at the extreme end of a runway where a familiar-looking Cessna was ringed by armed air police. I climbed laboriously from the chopper and approached the group. Hazel and Chen Yi were standing stiffly to one side while Erikson palavered with a major with an airdrome officer's brassard on his arm.

The officer turned suddenly and pointed at Hazel. An airman moved briskly in her direction. Chen Yi placed herself between the man and Hazel. The airman tried to shoulder the tall Chinese girl aside. She reached for him suddenly, and with seemingly effortless ease the man soared upward over her head to be extended at arm's length while everyone stared, popeyed.

Erikson ran to Chen Yi. "That won't be necessary," he was saying to her when I came close enough to hear. He looked at the beautiful, impassive features curiously as Chen Yi lowered the man to the ground. The airman seemed completely bewildered, the audience incredulous.

Erikson spoke to the furious-looking air operations officer again. "If you'll just permit me to speak to the Base Commander, I'll straighten this out," he said in a tone which indicated it wasn't the first time he'd said it.

"Under guard!" the officer snapped. "I've had enough of this foolishness!"

Erikson turned to Chen Yi again. "I'm sorry," he said. "The Coast Guard reported they found Candy in the wheelhouse—"

"Dead," she said evenly. Erikson nodded. "He had a premonition."

"I'm sorry," Erikson said again.

Chen Yi's face was an ivory mask. "It wouldn't be correct to say he planned it, but I'm not surprised."

When she didn't say anything more, Erikson climbed into an air police jeep. He was driven away with an armed guard seated beside him, another in the front seat. We stood at the end of the runway for twenty minutes while we awaited his return. The airdrome officer wouldn't let me talk to Hazel. The sun was warm, but the breeze was still chilly. I looked at my watch. It didn't seem possible,

but less than ninety minutes had elapsed since our fog-delayed takeoff from the polo field at The Presidio.

Erikson returned in the jeep with a colonel who looked no happier than the excitable major. The colonel huddled with the airdrome officer while Erikson came over to us. "I talked to Washington, and we're cleared to get out of here," he said. "I'm putting a muzzle on this group." Off to one side I could see the major's sullen look as the colonel talked steadily to the helicopter pilots. "No one wants any publicity," Erikson continued. "An accidental explosion on an abandoned military reservation will be the cover story. You and Hazel can fly back to the ranch whenever you like. I'll arrange for Chen Yi to be—"

"Chen Yi will be going back to the ranch with us," Hazel broke in. "We'll all fly to Nassau for the funeral, and then she'll come back with us again." After a second's hesitation, Chen Yi nodded agreement.

"I've got to fly to Washington as soon as I've cleared up a few loose ends here," Erikson said. "I guess about the only thing we didn't eventually stumble across was the fact that Emory Williams was the Knights' mastermind. Because he was in London when the last minute motorcade route plan change came through, the Knights approached Virgil Peterson to get them an IDA workup on the Fort Baker/Fort Barry reservations so the Knights could infiltrate the area with a minimum of detection while being prepared to overcome any resistance. The IDA study related originally to providing protection to shipping passing through the Golden Gate, especially munitions ships going to Viet Nam. The Knights adapted it to take a shot at the bridge."

Erikson shook his head. "Like the rest of the peaceniks who miscalculated the fanaticism of the Knights, Virgil wanted a demonstration but not an assassination. When he saw what they were driving at, he refused to cooperate, and they killed him after he refused to get the material from the crime study library for them. But the poor guy probably told them most of what they needed to know before he died."

Erikson raised his arm in the direction of the colonel. "Free to go, sir?" he called.

"Free to go," the colonel confirmed. He didn't look happy about it.

I got Hazel to one side. "Why don't you invite Chen Yi to come back to the ranch with us after the funeral?"

"I did," she replied, "but the San Francisco representatives of her family lawyers have told her that there's urgent family business and she must go to Taiwan. They've already advanced her the money."

Erickson shepherded us toward the Cessna. "I'll hope to see you in happier circumstances soon," he said.

He was standing beside the motionless helicopters, waving, when Hazel rammed the 310N down the runway and we zoomed aloft.

We landed at Buchanan Field, drove to San Francisco, and, at her request, left Chen Yi at the California Street apartment although Hazel urged her to stay at the Roosevelt with us. She promised to let us know the details of the funeral as soon as Erikson communicated with her, so we could attend.

On the way back to the hotel I reflected that we all had some forgetting to do.

DRAKE

He wasn't a good man; he wasn't a bad man; but his name was Earl Drake – and that was the difference

The minute I saw Karl Erikson coming towards me I smelt trouble. Every time special agent Erikson had a job too dirty and dangerous for one of Uncle Sam's bona fide undercover men, he just naturally thought of Earl Drake.

I couldn't afford to say no to Uncle Sam. My past was all too present – in Erikson's private files.

This time, though, I almost did say no. Because Uncle Sam wanted Hazel, too – and I prefer my woman alive.

'Beautifully tough-minded, tensely plotted, vigorous, first-rate story telling' NEW YORK TIMES

KP-381-255

CORONET BOOKS/HODDER FAWCETT L

Fiction: Crime

ISBN 0 340 16487 0

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